Guardian of Heaven and Earth - New Yogo

Book 10 of the Guardian of the Spirit Series

Author: Uehashi Nahoko

Guardian of Heaven and Earth

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New Yogo

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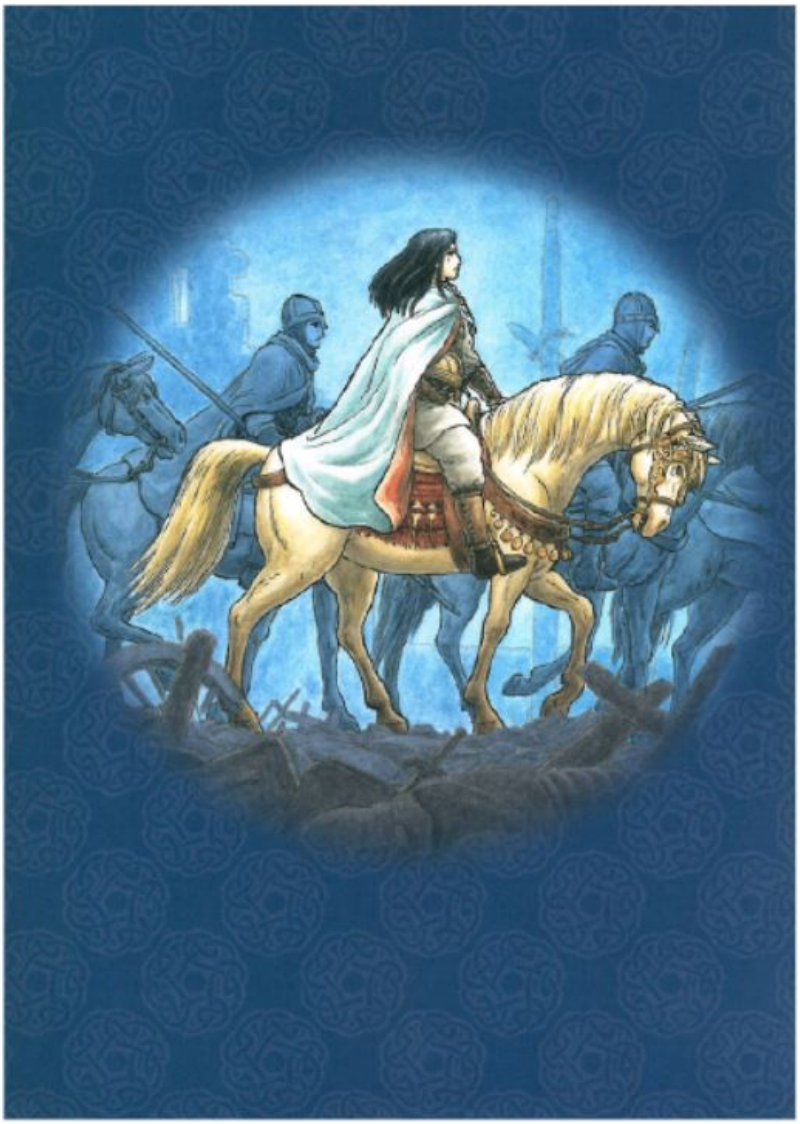

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An Excerpt from Chagum's Diary

I wonder where you are right now, Balsa. I keep thinking that riding at the head of an army is much more your style than mine. I hope you crossed the mountains safely and found Tanda. I miss Tanda's house. I wonder if I'll ever see it again.

We crossed the border safely into Rota yesterday. The Kanbalese cavalry riders are tough, but they've all been very kind. I see a lot of you in them, Balsa.

We should arrive in Jitan soon. Prince Ihan should be there waiting for us. I hope we can resolve the Rotan civil war quickly so that I can go home. I feel like I've been gone for such a long time, but it also feels like I only left yesterday.

What will happen to New Yogo? Will Shuga and the others manage to save it? Is my mother all right, and Mishuna? And my father? I don't know. All I know is that I'm headed into at least one war, and that a disaster is brewing in the north that has the potential to destroy Kosenkyo.

I wonder if I'll live to see the spring with my own eyes...

Prologue: The Fall of the Emperor

There was an enormous chamber with two perfectly round windows. The eastern-facing window showed a darkening world, and the western-facing one let in the last bit of golden summer sunlight before sunset. The room had been built to take full advantage of the cycles of the sun.

The elderly Emperor of the Talsh Empire lay stretched out on a large bed inside the chamber. His skin clung to his bones; he appeared dead already, but the light of consciousness still shone in his eyes. Emperor Orahan had seen the Talsh Empire expand in influence and power over the course of his long lifetime. The time had finally come for him to make his last wishes known.

A white-clad high priest of the temple of Areh stood at the Emperor's bedside, bearing a sacred staff. Golden circles representing the sun god Arueh were affixed to the staff. The staff was called an Arueh Koh, and was only used by high-ranking priests of the official Talsh religion.

There was a low desk next to the high priest where a harried-looking scholar sat making notes with with a brush pen. The Emperor's children sat on the other side of his bed, with their advisors and councilors sitting behind them. The Emperor had children late; the first of his six children was born when he was past forty. Two of them had passed away from illness; three sons and a daughter had survived. Crown Prince Hazar and Second Prince Raul were both near forty now, but the youngest prince, Yural, was only twenty. Princess Kasarina was twenty-three and had just been married the year before.

The most privileged place to sit--at the foot of the Emperor's bed--was not occupied by a family member, but by the Emperor's closest advisor, Aoil. Aoil was not a Talsh citizen, but he was inflexibly loyal to the Emperor and was one of his oldest friends. Aoil had been with him in times of both war and peace as the Talsh Empire expanded across the world.

The Emperor breathed heavily; the sound echoed loudly in the silent chamber. After a few tense moments, the Emperor gasped out, "It seems...I will not be blessed...to see the northern continent brought under our rule." There was gentle self-deprecation in his tone, as if he

felt foolish for even hoping to see such a thing. Second Prince Raul appeared genuinely grieved. He faced his older brother, Prince Hazar, and found him staring back. The two of them had fought fiercely over who would be the next Talsh Emperor for many years, but there was nothing in the look they gave one another but shared sadness.

They hadn't been able to bring their father's dream fruition during his lifetime. They understood that their father was going to die--and soon.

Their father's dream was simple, but not easy to accomplish. The high priests of Arueh, Yogoese Star Readers, and common magic weavers all agreed that a sacred land existed, far to the north beyond the ocean. The land was unexplored and undeveloped. When the southern continent's resources began to dry up, the Talsh Emperor started investigating this supposed sacred land, where spring lasted for a century and everything needful existed in abundance.

It wasn't clear if the northern continent really was this sacred land. It appeared like any other land, and it was already settled. The people there spoke of another realm called Nayugu or Noyook that might be the sacred land the Talsh Emperor was seeking, but it was difficult to be sure. Untold numbers of taku--Talsh spies--had visited the northern continent over the years, but none of them had discovered the entrance or the border to this sacred land. The Talsh Emperor had no choice but to order the subjugation of the northern continent so that he could search for this sacred land at his leisure. The Emperor prayed that he would live a hundred years--or at least long enough to see the sacred land with his own eyes. He had lived so long and seen so much. He longed to gaze at the future hope of the Talsh Empire before his death.

When people had cast doubt on the existence of the sacred land, he'd laughed. All of his actions were founded on the fact that it existed. But even if it was real, it was out of his reach now and always would be. He had been healthy and strong throughout his rule, but no one was completely immune to illness and old age.

"Every decision I've made is so that Talsh can be prosperous for a hundred--no, a thousand--more years," the Talsh Emperor rasped out. "Long after I'm gone. Hear the last decision that I will make in this world."

Everyone gathered in the room bowed their heads. Prince Hazar and Prince Raul's expressions were tight with worry. They watched their father, scarcely daring to breathe.

"Hazar," the Emperor said. "Raul. I leave the decision of who will be the next Emperor to my advisor, Aoil."

Both Raul and Hazar lifted their heads. The room remained silent, but the quality of the tension in it had changed. The Emperor's decision was a shocking, a possibly destabilizing, one. Aoil might have been the most shocked of them all.

The Emperor gazed up at Aoil. He was smiling slightly. "Are you really surprised?" he asked. "This might be the only time I ever surprised you in my entire life." He laughed hoarsely, but it turned into a hacking cough.

"The conquest of the northern continent is ongoing. Right now, it's not clear how the empire should proceed. But in a few more months, the path forward should become clear. I will not be here at that time,

but you will Aoil. Choose whichever son you think will lead the empire into the most glorious future."

Tears streamed down Aoil's face. Raul and Hazar looked at their father, speechless. The light in the room was failing; the last light of the sun fell on the Emperor's face as Aoil bowed his head gravely.

"The sun sets, but it always rises again. I promise to choose an Emperor who will shine new light upon the empire."

That night, the Emperor fell into a deep sleep. He didn't die, but everyone close to him knew that his death was near.

Prince Hazar returned to the southern wing of the Sun Palace complex, where his own castle stood, and ate a somber dinner. The commander of the Southern Army, Hamil, remained at his side; he was Hazar's closest advisor. Hamil brought out glasses and a wine called araku. He poured out the araku into the glasses, then placed one in front of Hazar. Hazar didn't even seem to see it.

Hamil wasn't a Talsh citizen. He had the dark skin and large eyes of the people of Karal. Though he was born into a conquered nation, he rose to become the right-hand man of Talsh's oldest prince.

"Why are you in such low spirits?" Hamil asked quietly.

"Why? What do you mean, why? You were there in that room with me, Hamil. My father might never wake, and he left Aoil in charge of making the decision on who would succeed him. It's almost certain that I won't be the next Emperor. Aoil has always felt sorry for Raul."

Hazar frowned deeply. He felt renewed sorrow every time his father had praised his brother over him.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty," Hamil said, "but I do believe you are mistaken."

Hazar looked up at him, still frowning. Hamil was smiling kindly. "I believe that Aoil will choose you. There are qualities you possess that are lacking in Raul and and in Kurz, his chief advisor.

Hazar looked at Hamil in fascination. "And what qualities are those?" he asked.

Hamil's smile deepened. "Aoil sees them, too. I'm certain of it. Following Prince Raul's intended path for our nation would be dangerous. I have a plan to help Aoil see that, if you would like me to put it into motion, Your Majesty."

Hazar narrowed his eyes and leaned forward. "What plan?"

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The Emperor lingered on in sickness for another ten days. Prince Raul ordered one of his own councilors, a man from Koranam, to be imprisoned on charges of causing harm to the empire. Aoil, too, was from Koranam.

The door to Prince Raul's room opened. He looked up from the documents he was reading to greet his guest, who knelt down in front of his writing desk and bowed his head deeply.

"Stand up, Hugo," Prince Raul said.

Hugo stood and looked up at Prince Raul. Prince Raul smiled slightly at him. "You're as brown as a nut. I imagine that happens, traveling

from the north to the south so much. When did you get back?"

"I returned to the capital this morning."

"Oh? And how are things in the north? I want a report on the state of the invasion."

"I'll tell you everything you wish to know," Hugo said, "but if I may beg your indulgence, there's been something of an emergency, Your Majesty."

"Emergency?" Raul asked, furrowing his brow. "What emergency?"

Hugo's expression was grave. "Is it true that Kurz's chamberlain Oiram has been arrested?"

Prince Raul rubbed his chin.

"You're asking about that? Yes, it is true. He's the mastermind of a plot against the empire. It's only natural; he's from one of our conquered nations, and we don't expect all subjugated citizens to be loyal. What of him?"

Hugo frowned severely and shook his head. "Please don't be hasty in your judgment, Your Majesty. Oiram isn't the mastermind of any sort of plot. He was framed by someone else. There's no evidence to implicate him in anything except for the word of other people--people who might have an interest in stirring up discord and discontent at the moment." Hugo dropped his sword, still in its scabbard, on the floor.

Prince Raul stood up straight. "If Oiram isn't the mastermind of the plot, then who is? Who masterminded it? You're my spy, Hugo; you should tell me more about these things before they happen."

"I was waiting for more evidence to present itself before bringing the matter to your attention," Hugo said. "I--"

"You idiot!" Prince Raul shouted. "If you even suspected something like this, you should have informed me immediately! We could have nipped this whole plot in the bud before it was ever an issue."

"I...didn't want to inform you sooner, Your Majesty."

"What?" Prince Raul's eyes narrowed.

"The plot had no form--no shape, no obvious mastermind. I wanted to lure out the instigator of it and trap them red-handed. All I knew was that it had something to do with the Emperor's succession. It came to be because someone is concerned about the direction the Talsh Empire will take after the Emperor dies."

Prince Raul remained speechless for a short while. He gazed down at Hugo with an expression of clear disapproval. Hugo had been born in the conquered nation of Yogo and had made it this far in Talsh society based on his own merits and ambitions. He was still young, but he might be the most perceptive and intelligent of all of Prince Raul's spies. He was also incredibly difficult to read.

Hugo knows something that I don't. The thought enraged Raul. "Hugo Arayutan. Do *not* apologize for your failings. You are not supposed to *have* failings when it comes to your business with me. I put you on the noble path of light, and I can take you off it just as easily. If you're no longer of any use to me, I'll lock you up just like Oiram. Guards!"

Palace guards rushed into the room and seized Hugo's arms.

"Abnormal events have been happening all over your territories," Hugo said calmly. "I've seen them. They're in my reports. My information can still prove useful."

Prince Raul snorted through his nose. "Worry about yourself now, Hugo. If you tell me the name of the actual instigator of the plot Oiram was blamed for, I might not lock you up."

Hugo said nothing. Prince Raul glared at his back with an expression of white-hot rage as he was led away.

***

Hugo awoke to wind blowing against his face. Someone else was standing outside the stone cell across from him: it was Sodok, the magic weaver. He was middle-aged and slightly built. Hugo had worked with him for years.

"What are you doing here?" Hugo asked.

"Is that any way to greet someone who came to rescue you?"

Sodok must have used magic weaving to make the guards on the cell sleep. His voice was hoarse from overuse and remembered pain. If he rescued Hugo from prison, he would be committing a severe crime.

Hugo stared straight at Sodok. They'd met when Hugo was seventeen; he was more like Hugo's irascible uncle than a colleague. Hugo found it difficult to believe that they were in this situation now; he never would have thought it possible as a teenager.

Hugo pursed his lips slightly, then shook his head.

"I don't feel like running away," Hugo said. "Thanks for the thought, but you should probably head back before what you're doing is discovered."

Sodok narrowed his eyes. "Don't be an idiot, Hugo. They'll torture you."

"Probably. But I can't leave right now." The light in his eyes shone strangely, as if it were coming from the bottom of his soul. "A plan is in motion to shake this empire to its very foundations. I know exactly what I have to do now. I have to be here--*right* here--when that plan sparks to life."

Sodok opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. He understood what Hugo was talking about now. "You got yourself suspected on purpose, so that you'd be thrown in here," Sodok said.

"Took you long enough to figure it out," Hugo said with a smile. He removed a small pill from a false tooth.

Sodok frowned when he recognized it. "An urasu?" Urasu were used to send souls wandering away from their bodies. He shook his head. "Are you serious? You know what will happen if you use it."

Hugo shrugged and returned the pill to his false tooth. "I won't give up the name of any contacts," he said. "If I die here, then that must be my fate."

All trace of Hugo's smile vanished from his face. "I understand how they feel. Truly and completely. That's one of the advantages of joining the other side, although I only did it for survival."

Hugo received three messages during his travels from the northern continent to Rahan, the capital city of Talsh. The first contained the

news that the next Talsh Emperor would be chosen by his advisor and prime minister, Aoil. The second came from one of Hugo's subordinates who had infiltrated Prince Hazar's Southern Army, informing him of Hamil's plot to implicate Prince Raul in a reputation-damaging plot. And the third was a message about Crown Prince Chagum, the seed that Hugo himself had planted on the northern continent. He was traveling with the bodyguard Balsa and would be arriving in Rota soon.

Hugo was willing to stake everything based on the information he'd gleaned from these three messages. If Prince Hazar and Hamil wanted to stir up trouble in the empire, Hugo could help with that. Much would depend on Aoil's decision. The waves of discontent and unrest were still small, but they wouldn't remain that way for very long.

When Prince Raul learned that his invasion of the northern continent wasn't as going as well as he'd anticipated, he'd be forced to make a critical decision--perhaps the most important decision of his life. Hugo had engineered this crossroads specifically for him. The Talsh Empire would either change or steer itself into the rocks and self-destruct.

"You really didn't have to come all this way to visit me, Sodok," Hugo said.

"I know, I know," Sodok cut in before he finished speaking. "Leave it to me. You don't have to do everything yourself, you know." He coughed, then said hoarsely. "You've always been a boy--you never grew up. You might die before you do, at this rate. Wherever your soul wanders, I'll find it. You've come this far on a gamble. Someone should see whether or not it pays off."

Hugo smiled, then bowed his head. He watched Sodok as he walked away down the dark corridor of the dungeon, listening to his measured footsteps.

Part 1: War

Chapter 1 - The Mountain Valley in Spring

Deep in a valley of the Misty Blue Mountains, signs of spring were stirring in a small village. Young koza trees budded and flowered with peach-colored blossoms as snow melted and the first of the season's flowers bloomed. The flowers' sweet scent carried on the soft breeze. Birds twittered and cheeped in the trees.

Balsa listened to the birdsong as she descended the mountain path on horseback. She saw the roof of a hut ahead, poking out from a gap in the trees. The hut was small; the wooden roof was weighted down with stones on the edges so the wind wouldn't blow it away. Tall grass and wildflowers grew in the yard.

Balsa approached the house on her horse, then dismounted. It didn't seem like there was anyone inside the house, but the grass was in the yard was uniform and even like it had been recently cut.

Balsa frowned. Tanda never cut the grass; he liked it to grow long and wild. She called out a greeting and received no reply.

Balsa entered the hut through the front door. The inside of the hut was clean: the earthen floor was packed down and swept and everything was put away. But there was dust on the table. Balsa guessed that no one had been here for quite some time.

A shiver went down Balsa's spine. She left the hut and went out into the garden, which was warm and inviting in the spring sunlight. She heard the sound of some small animal gnawing on the tall grass.

Balsa returned to her horse and untethered it from the tree where she'd tied it. She mounted up again and decided to go to the nearest

village to ask where Tanda had gone. Tanda's family lived in the village; they would tell her where he had gone if they knew.

As she descended the mountain path, the Blue Bow River split off in a tributary in a valley. Balsa stopped her horse suddenly when she saw signs of a recent landslide. Mounds of earth and stone had been used to divert the muddy tributary from its course to irrigate the rice fields near the village, though the cleanup from the landslide was imperfect.

Tanda and Torogai must have figured out what was happening with the weather. Balsa's mood improved dramatically. She was glad that the damage here had been repaired. It probably wouldn't be if Tanda and Torogai hadn't warned or helped the people of the village.

Balsa had come to tell Tanda and Torogai about a disaster that was coming from the north, in distant Kanbal. It was spring in Nayugu, which meant the water level of Nayugu's oceans and rivers were rising. There would be a great flood in New Yogo before long. It was critical that the people who lived in low-lying villages of the Misty Blue Mountains and the Yusa Mountains evacuated to higher ground as soon as possible. The people who lived in New Yogo's capital, Kosenkyo, would need to evacuate as well. Balsa had thought of nothing else while crossing the mountains except for relaying this message.

Now that she was finally in New Yogo, some of her own impatience and fear eased. She guessed that Tanda had left his hut to create more contraptions like she'd seen at the river. Maybe he was telling people to get to higher ground.

When Balsa came close to an elderly couple walking toward her from the north, she got off her horse and called out to them. Their eyes widened in recognition when they saw her.

"Balsa?"

Balsa knew them, too; she'd known them since she was a child. "Sako, Hio. It's been a long time." Their faces were caked with sweat and mud, but she'd recognize them anywhere.

Sako and Hio exchanged uncomfortable glances. "Nice weather we're having," Sako said awkwardly.

Balsa was stunned at being greeted as a stranger. She and Tanda had helped work Sako and Hio's rice fields as children. Sako had fet them sweet potato dumplings called tokko. The village children had considered them as kindly grandparents.

"What happened?" Balsa asked.

Sako and Hio didn't answer. They wiped their faces and stood still.

"Um," Balsa began. "I was just at Tanda's hut, but it doesn't look like anyone's lived there for a while. I'm going to the village to ask some questions about where he went. Do you know where he is?" she asked.

Sako and Hio shook their heads sadly.

Balsa felt her heartbeat quicken. She waited for them to say more, but they were stunned silent as the stooped-down figure of Torogai appeared on the slope above Balsa. She'd heard someone coming down the path and had come to investigate.

"Torogai!" Balsa exclaimed as Torogai emerged from a bamboo thicket.

"You finally came back." Torogai's sun-brown face was covered with countless tiny wrinkles. She was shiny with sweat. "I put a spell on the

hut that would let me know who went in and out. Were you riding a horse?" She sighed. "I'm glad I'm not too late."

"Too late?" Balsa asked.

"You'd put the village in quite a predicament if you showed your face there," Torogai said. She seized Balsa's hand in the middle of her sentence. Balsa recognized the desperation in her eyes. Torogai was drenched in sweat because she'd rushed all the way here to prevent Balsa from entering the village. Having caught up with Balsa, Torogai started dragging her by the hand back to Tanda's hut.

When they reached a place where Sako and Hoi couldn't see or hear them, Torogai stopped and said, "Where have you been?"

"I was in Rota, then Kanbal. With Chagum."

Torogai's expression brightened. "Is that so? Is that boy all right?"

Balsa nodded. "He's taller than me now. He's all grown up."

Balsa and Torogai talked about everything--with the exception of Tanda--on their way back to Tanda's hut. Balsa told Torogai what Chagum had seen in the heart of the Yusa Mountains in Kanbal. It was spring in Nayugu; a disaster was coming.

Torogai nodded. "I expected they would notice it in Kanbal. We noticed it last year and have been making preparations."

"I saw that," Balsa said. "The river's been diverted."

Torogai nodded. "People from all the nearby villages helped make that. And us magic weavers have been traveling along the Blue Bow River, explaining the danger that's coming." She sighed.

"I'm glad," Balsa said with a little frown, "but will it be enough? Diverting the water and building up dams might not be sufficient to prevent the damage of the flood that's coming."

"I don't know. We've decided to perform the sho yai when the flood comes, to tell people to get away from dangerous areas and onto higher ground."

"Sho yai?" Balsa asked.

"It's a magic weaving thing," Torogai said dismissively. "We'll all turn our souls into birds and fly around like bright lights, warning everyone." She had no patience to explain sho yai further, especially to someone as ignorant of magic weaving as Balsa.

"What I'm most worried about isn't the villages," Torogai said. "The people in the capital are in the most danger, and they'll be trapped on a flood plain with no way to get to high ground. No matter how many ditches and dams they build, the outcome will largely be the same. The only way for the people in the city to survive is to flee from their homes and into the mountains."

Torogai shook her head, then frowned in irritation. "The Star Reader Shuga informed the Mikado of this, but he can't force the Mikado to do anything. And he's in a difficult position himself; he can't even come to the Anything Store anymore. I'm sure that there's nothing but tragedy ahead for the capital."

Balsa frowned deeply, but she nodded. If Chagum were here, he might find some way to help Shuga order the evacuations. She was fairly sure that Shuga did have plans for an emergency evacuation in

place, but he likely wouldn't be allowed to implement them unless the Mikado gave the order.

"Chagum's coming with a combined army from Rota and Kanbal. He knows the situation. I'm sure he'll do something," Balsa said.

Torogai frowned. She knew from talking to Shuga that the Mikado likely wouldn't listen to anything Chagum had to say. "Leave this to me," Torogai said. "I'll talk to Shuga, and he'll find some way to tell the people in the palace that Chagum's coming back."

Balsa nodded. She walked beside Torogai in silence for a short while. "Poor boy," Torogai muttered as she walked.

Chagum's father, the Mikado, had ordered him assassinated when he was eleven years old. Their relationship had only deteriorated after that. Chagum had thrown himself into the sea to fake his own death some years before, so the Mikado still assumed that he was dead. He'd even held a grand state funeral for Chagum. When the Mikado learned that Chagum was alive and leading an army to help save New Yogo from imminent invasion by the Talsh, he would likely be greatly astonished, but not at all glad.

Chagum knew that. He was marching home to save his father and the people of New Yogo in spite of their strained relationship, not because of it.

Balsa and Torogai reached the garden in front of Tanda's hut. Both of them were uneasy and lost in thoughts of the past. Balsa tethered her horse to the same tree she'd tied it to before, then faced Torogai.

"Where is Tanda?" Balsa asked hoarsely.

Torogai blinked. "The Tarano Plains," she said.

Balsa was taken aback. "The Tarano Plains? Why would he be there?"

Balsa knew where the Tarano Plains were; they were a long stretch of flat land north of the border between Sangal and New Yogo.

"He got conscripted and sent to the border," Torogai said.

Balsa went white as a sheet.

"The Mikado sent out soldiers to collect ten men from each village. Tanda's brother Kaiza was one of the men who was chosen." Torogai sounded genuinely sad. "Tanda agreed to go in his brother's place after his family asked him to."

Balsa's world stood still; there was high-pitched ringing in her ears. Had Tanda really chosen to go to war instead of his younger brother?

Balsa remembered what the Talsh spy Hugo had told her.

"New Yogo will go to war at the opening of the new year. Talsh has been using the past two years to fortify and build up their presence on Sangal's islands. They're directing all their land forces to Sangal's main peninsula. Most of these forces belong to Prince Raul. They're battle-hardened veterans who have seen many campaigns, some in Orm, others in Old Yogo.

"New Yogo's soldiers have never been to war. They'll be slaughtered. It won't be a battle; it'll be a bloodbath. That's what the current Mikado has chosen for his nation."

She also remembered that Hugo had told her the war would start on the twelfth day of spring--five days from now.

Chapter 2 - Soldiers at Dawn

The wind blew morning mist gently across the plain. The sun rose over the horizon, bathing the Tarano Plains in soft spring sunlight.

Tanda's eyes passed over the archers at the front of the long line of soldiers. Men carrying shields were directly behind them to protect from counterattacks. Tanda and his unit were behind the men carrying shields. The sunlight reflecting off the Amata Mountains was blinding. The mountains themselves looked like a black line cutting across the sky.

A large, dark mass moved over the plain in the half-darkness. As they drew near, Tanda realized that they were pikemen. He looked to the left and right and all the way across the plain; there was no end to the vast army that he saw. The heads of the army's pikes and spears glinted in the dawn light. The wind howled behind them, pushing them closer as they ran toward New Yogo's much smaller army.

It was difficult to make out much of the pikemen's forms or faces. They were so densely packed together that they resembled a giant, mobile wall.

Tanda wondered what the Yogoese army looked like to the Talsh. Could they see the sweat on their faces? The fear in their eyes?

There was a signal horn; the Talsh pikemen marched faster toward the Yogoese army. Tanda and his unit stood with their spears held at their hips so that they could skewer the enemy. Their commander had prepared them for the initial assault, but their enemies had spears and pikes, too. Tanda didn't think they had much of an advantage.

Tanda hadn't given much thought to what would happen if he ran someone through-or if someone else ran *him* through. But he knew it would happen. Those were the only two outcomes. He would kill the enemy with his spear, or they would kill him with theirs.

Tanda felt the muscles of his stomach and chest pull tight from nerves. Kocha, a boy who'd been recruited with Tanda, stood near him a little up the slope. His pale and bloodless hands clenched his spear in terror.

I hope we never hear our own signal. I hope this battle never starts.

Tanda was torn between wanting to stay frozen in this moment forever or wanting to get it all over with as soon as possible. He was too exhausted to remain so fearful and on edge for very long.

"Think of your families," the commander's lieutenant had said while handing out weapons to the Yogoese soldiers. His own expression had been pinched and solemn. "You are soldiers. Soldiers die, but you are all alive. Think of your families, your children, and stay strong. If we fail to stop the enemy's cavalry from advancing now, many of your villages could be overrun by Talsh and Sangal. This is war, men. You are the shield that protects your wives and daughters and sons and homes.

"Think about your children's faces. Pray for the strength to cut down our enemies when they attack. Save your families, and yourselves."

There was a sound like distant thunder. Tanda glanced up in surprise. He didn't have to wait very long before he saw war drums; their beat resonated through his entire body. The drummers set a fast pace meant to speed up the advance of the Talsh army.

Tanda heard the signal for the Yogoese archers to fire. Despite the lieutenant's frequent exhortations, Tanda didn't think about his distant parents and siblings at all.

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The Yogoese army was camped in the foothills along one edge of the Tarano Plains. The army's commander, General Tokkasam, looked out at the opening of the battle with the Talsh army. His nervousness was plain on his face. He shielded his eyes with his hand and gazed at the horizon line. His stomach felt like it was sinking toward the ground.

General Tokkasam wasn't related to Army General Rado Yugaraku at all. He was a distant cousin of the deceased Crown Prince Chagum through the Harusuan family. Along with Navy Admiral Tosa, he'd been one of Crown Prince Chagum's strongest allies in the imperial court of New Yogo. That was why Army General Rado had given him such a difficult assignment. It was no great loss to Rado if someone disloyal to him died.

"What a strange formation," Tokkasam's lieutenant said. He should have been recording the Talsh numbers and their advancement in their war records, but he, like Tokkasam, was too distracted by the vastness and strangeness of the Talsh army.

Like the Yogoese army, the Talsh put their archers out front. The infantry soldiers behind them were variously armed and marched together with long strides that must take extraordinary cooperation and coordination; Tokkasam had never seen anything like it. They were

lined up so perfectly and moved so much together that it was like watching a huge black box march toward the Yogoese army.

The Talsh army had almost no cavalry forces, which was unexpected. Tokkasam guessed that there were about two thousand mounted warriors on the right side of the advancing horde, but why were they all clustered there? It wouldn't be easy for them to get more mounted reinforcements from here; they'd have to bring them over the Tohata Mountains.

The riders seemed to be defending a large object pulled by the soldiers that looked something like a rolling black tower. They must have prepared that the previous night; Tokkasam didn't remember seeing it before. The men around him gasped; they hadn't seen it, either, and could only guess what it was for.

"I've seen towers like that mentioned in our war records," the lieutenant said. "It's a siege engine. They're used to break down walls of castles and fortresses."

Tokkasam nodded. "They probably plan to launch large stones and other ammunition on us while we're fighting on the plain. There's no easy way to defend against that."

Tokkasam's hands were shaking. He took a deep breath and got himself under control. He knew that New Yogo had no chance of winning. He felt like the Talsh army was taking them lightly; they'd just arrived and had already build fortifications to harden their own position, but New Yogo wasn't capable of doing the same. Talsh soldiers were hardened veterans; New Yogo's were raw recruits.

But Tokkasam couldn't afford to panic. He had no time to indulge his own hopelessness. This was the first battle New Yogo would fight against the Talsh; he had to win or die trying.

He considered the enemy's position. Their biggest disadvantage was reinforcement; they wouldn't be able to gather more men from the south very easily, so it made sense to use a defensive formation and preserve as many of their troops as possible. The army had appeared vast at first glance, but looking at it with fresh eyes, Tokkasam guessed that Talsh had only fielded an army about the size of New Yogo's.

New Yogo was also entrenched and had the high ground; the Talsh would have to fight this battle uphill. They might ride around the Tohata Mountains and try to seize the high ground themselves, trapping the Yogoese soldiers in a pincer attack, but the distance around the mountains was quite far and the Talsh seemed to be in a hurry. It would also be difficult to signal their other allies from the mountains, even if they used flags and signal fires, since New Yogo's army would notice those things, too.

So Tokkasam dismissed the idea that the Talsh would send their main force around the Tohata Mountains, at least for the moment: doing that would take too much time. He considered the trap he'd laid for the Talsh army. It was hidden in the Yogese battle formation. New Yogo had never been to war, but that didn't mean it lacked warriors and generals who'd studied it.

There was a long line of spearmen and pikemen set up behind the Yogoese archers. Behind them, there were pit traps with sharpened stakes at the bottom. The enemy kept advancing as they were, they'd fall directly into those traps. Even if the the riders progressed all the

way to the pit traps, the horses wouldn't be able to cross the trenches. They made the Yogoese position on the battlefield much more defensible.

The next phase of Tokkasam's plan was to place temporary bridges over the trenches and surround the Talsh Army on either side, picking them off with arrows and driving them toward the trenches and the pit traps. The men on the front lines of New Yogo's army now were nothing more than decoys to lure in the main Talsh force. Gathering the enemy's forces in one place and attacking from all sides was a sound strategy, assuming Tokkasam had the numbers to make it work.

The main thing Tokkasam was worried about were the riders protecting the siege engine. The siege engine itself was a complication that he hadn't foreseen.

Tokkasam realized that his hands were shaking again. *It's all right,* he reassured himself. *Our army will win. I just know it.*

Chapter 3 - The War Begins

If Tokkasam had known that the main Talsh general had already taken the field, he might have had something else to worry about. They crossed over the Tohata Mountains much faster than he'd anticipated.

The Talsh general, Shubal, had played a significant role in conquering Yogo and Orm on the southern continent. He was so famous that everyone in Talsh knew his name. He sat on a folding chair that was simple to carry, surrounded by about fifty men, all with trimmed beards and neat-looking mustaches in the Talsh style. Most of the men were Talsh; they were strong and tall and deeply suntanned from their long travel to the northern continent.

Shubal gazed through a magnifying scope with one eye; the other was shut. The scope was called a Toka Ah Gul, and could be used to see distant things clearly. He surveyed the state of his army on both sides.

Shubal's lieutenant was Ormese; he was looking through his own Toka Ah Gul at his side. The lieutenant chuckled. "A splendid show. Reminds me of the tactics we used in Yogo when they revolted."

Shubal didn't smile. "I can't believe how antiquated their equipment and formations are. Is this what happens when a country doesn't go to war for two hundred years? I shudder to think what would happen to Talsh without war."

Glancing over at his lieutenant and spear-wielding guards, Shubal rose to his feet. Sunlight glinted on the spearheads of his allies. "We'll seize our opportunity soon. Pray for the great god Areh to warm our backs and encourage us as we engage."

His army would have the sun at their backs, which meant that the Yogoese army would be staring directly into it. They'd be blinded.

Shubal closed his eyes for a moment, then muttered something under his breath. The men surrounding him rose from their own chairs, awaiting the words that would formally begin the war.

Shubal opened his eyes, then nodded. He took a red banner flag and raised it aloft.

The man standing on top of the ogal, the siege engine that the Talsh had decided to field for this battle, saw General Shubal's signal flag. He raised up a similar red flag in his right hand. The men on the ground saw the flag, too, and let out a sound like a roar. The Talsh war drummers quickened the beat, playing in perfect time with one another.

Tanda and the others heard the drums as distant thunder, but the meaning of the sound was as clear as words.

"Ready the catapult! Prepare to fire!"

The Yogoese hadn't been certain about the nature of the siege engine. While General Tokkasam understood its basic design, the soldiers on the ground knew nothing about it and were shocked when huge rocks started to fall and crush parts of their line. The stones were lifted with great effort into a strong netted rope, then flung at high speed toward the Yogese army. The inexperienced soldiers trembled in fear.

The Talsh soldiers all took turns hoisting the stones into the catapult and firing it so that they wouldn't suffer fatigue. After exhausting their supply of large stones, the Talsh loaded in enormous

arrows and spears that fell in volleys on certain parts of the battlefield. The catapult increasingly focused its fire on the Yogoese cavalry units.

"Bring out the others!" An army engineer called.

There was a terrifying noise, followed by three more catapults springing up, seemingly from out of nowhere, smaller in scale than the first but no less effective. They were set up hastily and fired more and more projectiles toward the distant enemy.

The Yogoese soldiers had no idea how to combat these catapults. They stared at the sky in shock; several were frozen to the spot. There was no place for them to run where the catapults wouldn't reach them.

The men entrusted with shields gripped them fiercely and tried to reform the lines set at the start of the battle, but they were crushed as easily as everything else. Most of the soldiers were out of range of the catapults, but all of them were paralyzed with fear at seeing their comrades decimated so easily. The men who didn't freeze started running away in droves; the battlefield was complete chaos.

The first catapult released another large stone. The second released a volley of giant arrows at the same time. The projectiles whooshed through the air as they arced toward their targets: the Yogoese cavalry units.

The cavalry units were also stunned; they'd been ordered to stay back to keep them out of danger for as long as possible. No one had imagined that the Talsh would bring catapults or use them in this way.

Many more cavalrymen and horses were cut down as the stones and arrows landed. The Talsh army came up to surround the Yogoese army on the left and right sides while the catapults attacked from the

front. It was only a matter of time before the Yogoese force would be utterly destroyed.

Standing atop a plateau in the Yaul Mountains, Tokkasam shouted, "Form up! Attack! Archers, attack those manning the catapults!"

Tokkasam's lieutenant stood next to him and said, "They're out of range of our archers!"

"Then advance!" Tokkasam yelled. "Charge the enemy! Use the shields to defend you as you push forward!"

Tokkasam's lieutenant repeated these orders, giving signals to the other generals and unit captains using flags.

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Shubal's eyes widened in surprise when he caught sight of the enemy's signal flags in the Yaul Mountains. "Right, they'll charge straight ahead just like we thought. Ignore the shield-bearers; the cavalry are our target. Let's show them our claws, men."

Shubal's messengers went off to relay his orders. The rhythm of the war drums changed again, letting the Talsh soldiers know that they would soon be changing formation.

There was nothing the Yogoese force could do now that it had committed itself. They'd had an advantage that morning, but now, the Talsh forces surrounded them on every side but one. The cavalry were blocked in and couldn't move. The men carrying shields moved to protect them while archers scrambled for cover. More than an

organized line, the Yogoese army resembled a dense clump in the center of the battlefield.

The rhythm of the Talsh war drums changed, telling the army to attack the Yogoese archers and shield-bearers. The Talsh army rushed forward like an advancing wave.

The Yogoese generals couldn't see as far as the Talsh ones, so for a few desperate moments, they had no idea what was happening. The Talsh soldiers advanced with their shields held in front of them in a strict formation, with each soldier holding their shield to the left to make an enormous wall. The shields were made of leather and wood and not metal, which made them lighter to carry. The sound of the Talsh advance was a deafening roar that shook the earth.

It was the beginning of a long and bloody assault. The sound of the Talsh war drums were joined by flutes and whistles relaying different information. Tanda's unit could see the Talsh coming; people were screaming everywhere. The Talsh soldiers washed over the army unit like the wave of a tsunami. The ground shook like an earthquake; many men lost their footing.

When the Talsh army came within range of the Yogoese archers, Tanda heard whistles and commands ordering the archers to fire. The arrows whooshed through the air, thousands and thousands of them, whizzing toward the Talsh army like a thundercloud. There was a tense moment when the Yogoese soldiers held their breath; then Talsh soldiers started to fall out of formation, pierced by arrows.

The Talsh soldiers did as the drums commanded, marching forward without even looking where they were going. When the rhythm of the drums changed again, they stopped and got down on their knees so that

the mounted archers behind them would have a clear shot at the enemy army. The foot soldiers arranged their shields in formation again to protect themselves as a rain of arrows flew directly overhead.

The Yogoese army released another volley of arrows. The Talsh shield-bearers scrambled to protect their mounted archers, surrounding them on every side. Some arrows did pierce through the shields, but most of the shields held.

The concerted assault of the Talsh archers opened a gap between two parts of the Yogoese army. The mounted archers rode into that gap, accompanied by their shield-bearing defenders.

Tanda heard thunder again and looked up. Arrows traveled in a black sheet across the dark gray sky. The shield-bearer protecting Tanda went down screaming when half a dozen arrows pierced his shield. There were more screams and shouts as arrows found their targets.

The ground rumbled beneath Tanda's feet. The Talsh spear-wielders were coming; the tips of their weapons shone in the morning sun. The Talsh army marched relentlessly forward, led by the mounted archers and the shield-bearers.

There had probably been some kind of whistle or signal to field the spear-wielders, but if there was, Tanda hadn't heard it. The men surrounding Tanda were pinned to the ground by enemy spears. There was a terrible crunching sound, then the sound of metal contacting metal as the Yogoese spearmen engaged the Talsh in battle.

A bearded Talsh soldier leaped on the broad shield of one of his comrades. He carried a small buckler and his blade was unsheathed. The soldier called out commands, separating the Talsh spearmen into three separate ranks so that they could attack different parts of the battlefield.

Tanda observed the soldier with an expression of horror. The sun was behind the soldier, so all Tanda could see of his expression was the murderous gleam in his eyes as men to Tanda's right and left were butchered.

A spearman thrust his weapon at Tanda. Tanda tried to duck behind a shield, but as he moved he felt a sharp pain like fire coursing through his left hand. The spear's point hit bone. The spearman had been aiming for Tanda's neck and grunted in disappointment.

Tanda tripped over his own feet and collapsed, choosing to play dead. The small shield that he held tumbled to the dirt along with his pike.

Tanda felt too heavy to move. Men trampled over him without a care, advancing onward to kill others. Tanda couldn't breathe; everything hurt. He heard the sound of his legs breaking as they were trampled on and felt blood dripping down his muddy face before he finally lost consciousness.

Chapter 4 - Abandoned City

Balsa placed her palm on the trunk of a tree, observing the scene before her from the cover of the woods. Far in the river valley below her, a fortress was being built along the road. Balsa remembered this road as being a busy one, but there were no signs of people traveling along it now.

Balsa had thought to travel south from the Misty Blue Mountains straight to the Tarano Plains. This was easier said than done. Many common roads were blocked or sealed off. She hadn't wanted to detour around the blockades, so she'd cut through the mountains instead. There were many fortresses in the mountains now that she'd never seen before. She always felt a vague sense of unease--and a burning sense of impatience--whenever she passed by another fortress or blockade.

All of Balsa's detours pushed her further west than she wanted. She was close to the city of Shirogai now, which was close to the border of New Yogo and Rota. She was irritated at having gone so far off-course. She wanted to arrive at the battlefield before the war started, but that was probably impossible now. It had been three days since Balsa had heard that the Talsh offensive would begin on the Tarano Plains.

Balsa didn't know what she hoped to accomplish by reaching the battlefield before the war started. It wasn't like she could stop a war on her own. Coming to Shirogai first might work out for the best. She could ask the merchants there if they knew any roads that would avoid all the fortresses and blockades. Asra, Chikisa and Martha also lived in Shirogai. She wanted to make sure that they were safe.

There was no way to Shirogai that didn't connect to the fortress road, so Balsa was forced to pick her way through the mountains again to avoid both the fortress and the patrolling soldiers.

Balsa took one last look at the fortress before continuing on her way. There weren't terribly many soldiers guarding it. She saw only two lookouts standing at the top of a tower. The construction of the fortress was also slapdash and unsophisticated. It might not be obvious from the ground, but most of the walls were formed of logs all piled and woven together with grass and straw: not as tough as stone would be, or even tightly packed clay.

Balsa couldn't help but compare this crude fortress to others she'd seen. There was one to the south of the capital along New Yogo's border with Sangal that was solid stone and strongly constructed. This fortress wasn't even built to take advantage of the high terrain. She had seen a few fortresses with solid construction during her journey, but most of the ones she'd seen looked a lot like the one in the river valley below. Many hands had scrambled over the past two years to build these fortresses, though Balsa doubted they would do much good against an enormous, well-equipped army.

I'm sure the Talsh spies know about these fortresses, Balsa thought, frowning. *They probably know that they're shoddily built and poorly manned.* That didn't bode well for the future.

Balsa was familiar with Talsh spies--and assassins. She knew that the Talsh had been gathering information on New Yogo for years before they'd decided to invade. New Yogo was at a serious disadvantage in many ways. Balsa didn't doubt that the Talsh army could map a route to

the capital that avoided all these fortifications and checkpoints; their information network was probably that good.

This road cuts through the Tarano Plains, so controlling it right now is strategic. The Talsh will come marching up it if the Yogoese army is defeated. If the Yogoese army stops the Talsh, though...

If the Yogoese army was, by some miracle, successful in stopping the Talsh invasion at the Tarano Plains, then the Talsh army would have to take a different, more circuitous route to Kosenkyo.

Balsa gritted her teeth. She hated not knowing what the outcome would be. She tried not to think about the war, but she had nothing else to occupy her thoughts.

Tanda's all right, she thought. *He's always been lucky.* She didn't even consider the possibility that he was dead. He couldn't be.

Balsa climbed down the mountain through the trackless forests, out of view of the sentinels at the fortress. Horses couldn't pass through the mountains, but experienced hikers and climbers certainly could. She stayed out of sight in the trees for about half an hour, watchful for any other travelers, then walked the rest of the way to Shirogai on the road.

By the time Balsa reached Shirogai, it was dusk. The road was blocked by a large wooden gate whose doors were barred firmly shut. There were armed guards standing a little away ahead of her; Balsa could see them because of the watch-fires set to either side of the gate.

When the firelight passed over the face of one of the guards, Balsa gasped in recognition. "Obal?"

Obal turned away from the gate and faced Balsa, spear in hand. "No, it can't be--Balsa?"

"I had no idea this gate was here," Balsa said. "It looks like it's shut for the night, but could you let me pass? I really can't wait for morning."

Obal laughed. "Well, sure. Just give me a minute."

Balsa waited in front of the gate's large wooden doors. She'd known Obal for a very long time. He was still young, but he was an excellent guard. They'd guarded caravans in Rota together. The men guarding Shirogai weren't Yogoese soldiers, but hired guards; the city must have decided to pay for its own protection.

There was a muffled click from the other side of the gate. The wooden doors opened, letting Balsa through. Obal shut the doors behind her.

The gate didn't lead to the city road, but to an interior space that looked like a merchant's warehouse. There was a large fire set in the very center of the dirt floor. Spears, swords, bows and arrows lined the walls. There were men around the fire, ten or so, all eating and talking.

"What is this, some kind of trade fair?" Balsa said with a little laugh. "Are you guarding the place or having a party?"

"Who says we can't do both, Balsa?" Obal said. He ladled out some rice wine from a jar and passed a full cup to Balsa. "Here, have a drink. We'll talk later."

"Aren't you on duty right now, Obal?" Balsa asked. "You shouldn't be drinking on shift, you know."

"Tell me something I don't know," Obal said. "One drink won't kill me. That's not even enough to get me drunk."

The other guards chuckled; they were all old friends of Balsa and Obal. She'd worked with many of them before while traveling in Rota.

The irascible merchant Tachiya arranged for caravan guards in Shirogai; Balsa had met many of these men through Tachiya.

Balsa pulled up a chair and sat down, but she refused the offered drink. "Sorry, Obal, but I don't drink on an empty stomach. Is there anything to eat?"

"For you, Balsa? Of course there is." He slugged the rice wine in the cup down in a single gulp, then fetched Balsa a wooden bowl of bird meat stew.

Balsa thanked Obal. She asked him and the other guards some questions about what they were doing here while she ate. "What is that gate for, anyway?" she asked.

"All the towns and cities have gates like this now, Balsa," one of the guards said. "There's a war on--haven't you heard?"

"I've been away in Kanbal," Balsa said.

"Ah, I heard that," Obal said. "There was talk of you sneaking people over the border, out of New Yogo and back in again. You've got balls. The soldiers kill anyone crossing the border these days on sight."

Balsa listened to the guards as they described New Yogo's current situation. What she heard chilled her blood. The Yogoese army had been pulled back to protect the capital, leaving the Nayoro Peninsula and the southern villages entirely defenseless. The West Imperial Highway and North Imperial Highway were blockaded; many fortresses and fortifications had been built along both roads to help defend Kosenkyo, the capital. Guards were in high demand; soldiers had been conscripted from every family in the nation. Despite this, many men

would not be defending their homes--the entire southern half of the country had been given up for lost before the war had even begun.

Balsa had approached Shirogai from the northeast. She'd seen the fortress along the road there. The fortress must have been built to protect against attacks to Shirogai coming from the south.

But there were many ways into Shirogai besides the main road. Balsa had just proven as much herself. The shoddy fortresses built along the main road would do little to protect the Shirogai, or any of the other towns and villages near the border. If the Talsh army made a concerted effort to reach Kosenkyo, they would de facto conquer the country as soon as they captured the capital. Even if the Talsh didn't capture Kosenkyo immediately, they could occupy the defenseless towns and villages and use their resources to resupply.

One of the guards frowned deeply. "The Imperial Army isn't protecting much. I've heard rumors that they intend to burn down all the villages along the Talsh invasion path to prevent the Talsh army from stealing food and supplies."

"So you were hired by the townspeople to protect them from New Yogo's soldiers?" Balsa asked.

None of the guards said anything in reply.

Obal spoke up. "We don't know what will happen yet," he said. "If us being here gives the townspeople a little peace of mind, then that's probably the best we can do."

"I don't want to fight off the Yogoese army if we don't absolutely have to," another guard said. "No one wants to be drawn up on treason charges--or executed as a traitor. But the Talsh will be coming from the

south, and the Yogoese army will be coming from the north. Who knows which one will get here first. We have no safe place to go, in any case--Rota's right behind us, and they're at war, too."

Balsa was about to ask about the war in Rota when a door opened behind her. Several merchants entered the room. From their clothes, Balsa guessed that they were wealthy and influential in Shirogai.

"Good work today again, men," one of the merchants said. "It's started getting colder, so we've brought you more wine to help keep you warm at night."

"Oh! Thank you very much." The guards bowed their heads in appreciation.

One of the merchants recognized Balsa; his eyes went wide. "Balsa!"

"Toun!" Balsa stood up to greet Toun, who was Martha Samada's son. Martha was a very successful clothing merchant in Shirogai. "I'm so glad you're here. I know it's short notice, but could you take me to the Samada Store? I can't linger here very long, I'm afraid."

"You know you're always welcome at our store." Toun grinned at her. "Mother, Asra and Chikisa will be delighted to see you. I never expected to meet you here."

Before they left for the Samada Store, Toun took a seat. Balsa sat across from him. "I can't imagine you know what's going on here," Toun said.

Balsa nodded. "I came here to learn more. I don't know if there's anything I can do to help, but I'd like to try, at least."

Martha owned the Samada Store; she had taken in Asra and Chikisa after their parents had died. Martha was also the closest thing Balsa had to a mother; Balsa and Jiguro had spent a great deal of time with Martha and her family while she was growing up. Balsa couldn't possibly abandon Martha and her family if their lives were in danger.

And yet, Balsa was impatient. She had so little time left to get to the Tarano Plains. "Toun," she said, "I meant it when I said that I can't linger here. I need to get to Tarano Plains."

"You're joking, right?" Toun asked. "That's where the battlefield is, Balsa! The war's already started!"

But Balsa wasn't joking. Toun shook his head sadly. "So you're worried about Tanda," he said. "Isn't he in the army?"

"So you know about that," Balsa said.

"Yes, I heard from Chikisa that he was drafted. Many people were drafted in the city, too, though they were all strangers." Toun leaned forward and said in a low voice, "The opening battle was a few days ago. I don't know much, but it was a slaughter. Half the soldiers stationed between here and the Tarano Plains are dead. I hear they're abandoning the dead and wounded along the sides of the Imperial Highway. There's no place left to bury them."

A full-body shiver went through Balsa. She put her hand to her mouth in shock and faced the fire. "There must be survivors," Balsa said in a trembling voice. "Where are they?"

"Probably in the normal army camps. All the survivors I know of are holed up in the fortresses around here."

Balsa dropped her hand to her knee. "But what if he was wounded and couldn't make it to a fortress..." What if Tanda had been wounded and left on the side of the road somewhere?

"I can see that you still intend to go to the Tarano Plains," Toun said sadly.

"Yes," she said, "but I also have Asra and Chikisa to consider. And I can't be in two places at once. I have no idea where Tanda is right now--a fortress? The Tarano Plains? I'll search when I can, but..."

Balsa was torn over what to do next. She stared into the fire with the flames flickering across her face.

Chapter 5 - Reunion with Asra

The birds cheeped and twittered as they awoke. Chikisa was sweeping out the back courtyard in the gray light of dawn. He started his cleaning and chores at the Samada Store early. He always did a good job out of gratitude to Martha, who had taken him in along with his little sister and given them a home and a trade.

The work was hard sometimes, but Martha was always kind. He was afraid of angering Toun, whose standards were very strict. Chikisa knew that Toun was a good man; he was just very tall and very direct, which bewildered Chikisa sometimes.

The other people that Chikisa worked with in the store were wonderful. When Asra and Chikisa had first arrived at the store, the store's workers had treated them just like family. Chikisa was grateful to all of them. Taking care of Asra hadn't been easy at first, but everyone had pitched in to help, and now Asra was well enough to help out at the store. She had sealed away the terrifying god by ripping the ring of sacred mistletoe from her own neck. Chikisa prayed fervently that the god would never return.

To Chikisa, Asra's recovery was a miracle. The terrifying god had killed so many people. Asra had paid a heavy cost to get free of the god; her soul had wandered in darkness for long months before it had finally returned to her body. Chikisa had been prepared to say goodbye to her forever.

But Balsa and Tanda hadn't given up on Asra, and Asra hadn't given up on herself. She had passed a long winter in the darkness, but when

spring came, she regained consciousness. She began to eat. Eventually, she was able to walk again.

Asra was Martha's apprentice now. She was a weaver and could make clothes. She had recovered so much of herself, but she was still unable to speak. She had nightmares most nights and awoke drenched in sweat. Chikisa hoped that she would regain her voice someday, and that she'd be able to live free of fear from Talhamaya, the terrifying god.

The bell signaling breakfast time started to ring. Chikisa gathered with the other apprentices near the well to wash his hands and face. Asra's morning work was to clean up the weaving workshop, so she would also come to the well after her chores were done.

Chikisa saw a group of girls emerge from the weaving workshop, talking and laughing. Asra followed them silently with her eyes cast down. Chikisa came forward and held her hand, leading her to the well. He helped her wash her face, teasing her about missing a spot.

Asra didn't smile. There was no trace of joy on any of the workers' faces. The war had begun, and they were all in terrible danger now. Everyone did chores and work like always, but no one ever came to buy any clothes. The people of Shirogai saved their money or spent it on necessities, like non-perishable food.

Shirogai was a bustling trade town. When Chikisa and Asra had first arrived, it was a prosperous place full of people and bright colors, but many people had fled because of the war. Shirogai seemed empty and lonely now. Everyone Chikisa passed in the street eyed him with apprehension and kept walking. There were lots and lots of clothes hanging in the store, but they'd been hanging there for months, not

bought and not worn. No one knew how long the Samada Store would stay open.

But there was still breakfast every morning; rice and soup and stewed vegetables. Chikisa always liked eating with everyone; it made him feel safe and like he and Asra belonged.

Suddenly, Asra started shaking. Chikisa looked at her in alarm, then noticed that she was staring at a corner of the kitchen. When he looked, he saw a very familiar woman standing there. "Balsa?"

Balsa faced Chikisa and smiled. She waved at him and Asra.

Chikisa and Asra dashed over to Balsa at top speed. Asra gripped Balsa in a tight hug, hiding her face in Balsa's chest. Chikisa was a bit surprised at that; Asra wasn't usually so emotional.

Balsa also seemed surprised at the force of Asra's hug. She frowned a little, then wrapped her arms around the little girl and returned her clasp firmly. "I know I haven't visited for a while," Balsa said. "Forgive me."

Asra made a muffled sound like a groan.

"When did you get here, Balsa?" Chikisa asked.

"Late last night," Balsa said. She was still hugging Asra. "You were both asleep. I didn't want to wake you."

"Will you stay for a while?"

Balsa patted his head as if he were a child. "Don't make that face at me," she said.

Martha's laughter echoed from behind Asra and Chikisa. "Now, now. If you keep crowding Balsa like that, she'll never get to eat!"

Both Asra and Chikisa dropped politely into seiza, giving Balsa plenty of room. Asra blushed red with shame at her rudeness.

"You can eat with Balsa," Martha said kindly. "Just make sure she gets a plate first, you two."

Asra's face lit up like a sunrise.

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Balsa didn't have much time to spend with Asra and Chikisa. The war was approaching fast. Balsa had heard from Toun that three riders had passed through Shirogai's gate the previous night, coming from the direction of the capital. They'd been riding hard, so Toun guessed that they had news of the battle on the Tarano Plains. They were headed to the nearby fortress. Toun feared that they would tell the soldiers there to burn Shirogai and the surrounding towns and villages to prevent their resources from being used by the advancing Talsh army.

Balsa suddenly understood why the fortress she'd seen outside the city was so roughshod and sloppy. It wasn't a fortress meant to block the Talsh's way: it was an information center, passing messages from east to west about the enemy's movements. The Talsh likely knew that country was largely undefended on this side. If she were them, she would choose to come up the Imperial Highway toward Shirogai, attacking soft targets along the way.

After breakfast, Balsa accompanied Toun to the city square. The atmosphere in Shirogai was as tense and taut as a bowstring about to snap. Many men were already gathered in the city square when Balsa

and Toun arrived. These were the leaders of each city section and other administrative officials. The square was packed with guards as well as personal bodyguards hired by the officials.

The leader of the city was named Aoun Tando. He looked around at the gathered people and said, "Thank you for gathering here. You've probably all heard about the riders that passed through here on the way to the fortress last night. If anyone has ideas on how best to protect the city, please share them now."

The assembled men and officials talked amongst themselves, sharing ideas. Balsa stood a little removed from them and listened. Everyone agreed that the gate in front of the city wouldn't be strong enough to keep the Talsh out. There was a stone wall to the west of the city to help keep out bandits, but no wall protected the farmers' fields or homes. Even hiding behind the wall wouldn't help much, since the city could be easily surrounded by such a vast force.

The more the men talked, the more worried they all appeared. After listening for almost an hour, Balsa understood that there was no good way to protect the city in the event of an attack. All she foresaw in the future was casualties--a lot of them.

If Balsa were the Talsh, she would occupy Shirogai and use it as a base to attack the surrounding fortresses and control the main road leading from New Yogo to Rota. Balsa understood why Yogoese soldiers had been ordered to burn it before that could happen, but that seemed like an unusually cruel fate for a merchant town.

As Balsa saw it, there were only two ways to make sure everyone in Shirogai lived through the Talsh attack. She was only a wanderer, so it

was possible that the people wouldn't listen to her, but she felt like she had to try; lives were at stake.

When the city leaders grew hoarse from speaking, Balsa stood up and said, "I realize that I'm not from this city, but I've passed through it many times and have some ideas about the current situation. Will you hear me?"

The city leader, Aoun, nodded his head. "Please speak. I'm open to every idea that might save our city."

"I've defended caravans from Shirogai for years," Balsa said. "The city itself is very difficult to defend, and the Talsh know it, too. I think the only way for all the people here to survive is to run. Abandon the city and flee to someplace safer."

"You're kidding, right?" one of the officials said. "We're a merchant town. If invaders come, they'll make use of our shops just like everyone else. That's the life of a merchant."

"Hear me to the end," Balsa said, standing up straighter. "If people don't want to flee--if they want to cooperate with the Talsh--then they might stay, though I suspect the Talsh will strip the city of anything of value without paying. And if people want to stay and fight the Talsh, I understand that, too. I'm talking about people who want to *survive*. People are going to lose their homes and stores in the coming attack regardless of what happens, but they don't have to lose their lives, or their families'. If I lived here, I would pack up everything I could carry and leave before the Yogoese soldiers or the Talsh invaders come and take it all."

An old bodyguard leaning against a wall across from Balsa stepped forward. His name was Gashu. "That same thought is on everyone's mind, young woman. But where can we run? We cannot flee south; the lands to the south face the same danger we do. If we flee to the mountains, we abandon our city to the Talsh, which no one truly wants."

"That is indeed one way to flee," Balsa said, "but I was thinking of another as well."

"Another?" Gashu asked.

"Yes." Balsa nodded. "Flee to Rota."

There was a long silence. Then, everyone started speaking all at once. Aoun took up his cane and slammed it into the ground, commanding silence.

"Rota?" Aoun asked. "Impossible. The border is sealed shut; no one is permitted to pass through."

"I know a way," Balsa said. "I've guided people to Rota before, even though the border's closed."

Obal was standing near Balsa; he nodded. "There are rumors that Balsa has been leading people over the mountains for the past few years to avoid the border checkpoints. Is that what you plan to do, Balsa?"

Balsa shook her head. "The aged and little children couldn't make it through the mountains. But the Samal Pass is very close to Shirogai. In just a few days, everyone in Shirogai could make it to Rota."

"The Samal Pass is guarded by over a hundred men," Gashu said. "How do you intend to get past that? The women, children and the old

can't fight."

"The Samal Pass might have been guarded that heavily in the recent past, but now, the war has started. I expect that the situation has changed. When I came to Shirogai last night, I saw that the fortress closest to here had only a skeleton guard--the bare minimum were left behind while everyone else marched off to join the main army. The men who are left there can't possibly defend the entire city. The situation at the border is probably the same.

"There are guards and bodyguards that can travel with the rest of the people. We might not be able to take a hundred armed guards, but we'd easily be able to take ten, or twenty, or even thirty. Am I wrong?"

The other guards in the city square exchanged uncomfortable glances, then started whispering to one another. Those carrying swords and spears surveyed Balsa critically.

The atmosphere in the square suddenly changed. The people gathered here were still worried, but they had hope now. It was possible for everyone in Shirogai to escape with their lives.

"Merchants take the Samal Pass frequently to get into Rota, so they should know the way," Balsa said. "I imagine some Rotans were trapped here when the borders closed as well. Everyone should be able to make it across the border and get settled somewhere without too much trouble."

Aoun looked around the square, then nodded firmly. "Well, it does seem like most people want to try it."

Some of the older merchants were concerned about traveling so far, but all of the younger men supported Balsa's idea. Aoun took a brief

show of hands, confirming that the idea was popular.

"You're Balsa the spear-wielder, aren't you?" Aoun asked. "I've heard of you from Tachiya. He has great confidence in you, and I can give you no better endorsement than that. Tachiya is not an easy man to impress."

Aoun looked around at the assembled men once more. "What do you say?" he asked. "Shall we try it?"

The older merchants, and some of the older bodyguards, cast their eyes down, but everyone else nodded in assent. Gashu, one of Balsa's old friends, stepped forward and said, "We knew from the start that we wouldn't he able to defend this place from the Talsh army. There aren't enough men here for that. All that waits for us if we stay here is a conflict with the Yogoese army. They've told us they will burn the city rather than let it fall into Talsh hands. Shirogai isn't fortified; it can't do anything against fire or arrows or catapults. We're better off seeking shelter elsewhere."

The reluctant merchants looked pale, but Balsa saw a few of them give cautious nods. Nearly everyone agreed that leaving Shirogai and going to Rota was the best possible option for survival.

"I'll serve as a bodyguard for anyone who wants to travel through the Samal Pass," Gashu said. "For a fee, of course, but I'm prepared to offer a very reasonable rate."

"Aren't we already paying you to protect the city?" one of the merchants asked. "Why should we pay you more?"

Some of the bodyguards and caravan guards grumbled. Aoun put up his hand. "This isn't an ordinary caravan guard mission. These are

extraordinary times, and what we propose to do is dangerous. Think of it as hazard pay. You're free to try to get past the border without guards, if you wish." He folded his arms, then faced Balsa and Gashu.

"Both of you have excellent reputations. I wouldn't fear for the city's safety if you escorted us to the border. Would you agree to that, Balsa? You and all the other guards who come would be paid, of course."

"I would like to, but I can't," Balsa said. "I must remain in New Yogo right now. I can't go anywhere for a while. But you'll be in safe hands with Gashu and the other guards."

Aoun frowned, but he nodded in understanding. "Well, you have your reasons, I'm sure. Here's what we'll do: we'll pay up what we owe the guards for defending the city, then pay the escort fee once we make it safely across the border. Does that sound fair?"

Gashu seemed a bit surprised, but he nodded.

Chapter 6 - Shirogai in Flames

That evening, the light of countless torches lit up the city from the outside. Balsa, Obal and some other guards surveyed the scene from some distance away, in the fields beyond Shirogai's walls. The fields were in terrible shape from the trampling of soldiers and riders across the countryside.

Balsa and Obal were downwind from the torches, so they could smell smoke--and horses. The torch-bearers were still a long way off, but they moved in perfect time with disciplined movements. Balsa also saw supply wagons and carts trailing behind the main line. Their banners revealed the riders to be Yogoese.

"They'll be here by tomorrow night if they don't rush," Obal said.

"Three guesses why they're coming, and the first two don't count," Balsa muttered.

Gashu cursed behind Balsa. He'd been chosen to lead the people of Shirogai out of the city, so he'd spent the day organizing supplies and making sure everyone was ready to move. But now, there might not be enough time to get everyone out before the Yogoese soldiers arrived.

A few guards had already been sent ahead to the pass to investigate how many men were there. Balsa had helped organize the packing and organizing efforts. She wanted everyone in the city to know that they would have to pack up all of their belongings and flee. Aoun reinforced her words, since he assumed that the Yogoese soldiers were coming to destroy the city.

Later that night, Balsa noticed several scouts that didn't appear to be Yogoese trying to sneak closer to the city under cover of darkness.

She didn't recognize their clothing, so she assumed they were Talsh.

"I never thought they'd come this close," Obal whispered to Balsa.

"We have to get out of here," Gashu said. "I'll tell people to bring whatever they can carry. We have no time to linger."

Balsa nodded. She went through the plan with all the guards one more time, then stood up. The evening was wearing on; Balsa selected a horse for rent and made her own preparations to leave Shirogai. Balsa would have preferred to travel in darkness, but there was a chance the horse might slip and fall if she did, so she lit a torch as well. Speed was paramount, not secrecy, and having light would help to speed her on her way.

Balsa rode out in front of the other guards, scarcely repressing the urge to gallop at top speed, until she reached a rubbish heap as large as a small hill. "Looks like a waste dump," she said. "The city's, what, half an hour from here?"

No one would discard anything hazardous or smelly too close to town. There were usually waste hills or pits some distance away from the larger cities in New Yogo. The children of Shirogai avoided this one because of the stink, though they sometimes dared their friends to get close to it as a test of courage.

"I never thought I'd be glad to smell that again," Obal said. "We're getting close."

Balsa felt something strange in the air and said, "Stop."

Gashu and Obal checked their horses. Balsa pulled up on her reins.

"What is it?" Obal whispered.

"Sh." Balsa stayed very still and listened. She could hear hoof beats downwind, close and getting closer.

"We can't go further into the forest," Balsa whispered. "Someone's coming."

Balsa put out her torch, then flung it away from her. She didn't want anyone to be drawn to the smell of smoke.

"Maybe it's someone from Shirogai, coming to us with a message," Obal whispered.

"If that were the case, we'd see them," Balsa whispered back. "Control your horses well. We must move quietly--near-silently. If they're Talsh spies, I doubt they'll attack, but there's a risk that whoever it is might shoot first and ask questions later. I don't like this. We might be walking into an ambush."

Gashu frowned. "But why would Talsh spies be riding toward us from Shirogai?"

"They might think we're from the Yogoese army. They're being quiet--maybe they want to slip past us in the dark." Balsa held her breath and guided her horse toward a bamboo grove. Obal and Gashu followed her.

Five shadowy riders came into view in the middle distance. They carried no torches and were moving fast. The riders passed by the bamboo grove where Balsa and the others were hiding; they were nearly past when Obal's horse snorted.

It was a soft sound. It was possible that the riders wouldn't hear it, or would think that one of their own horses had snorted.

But the riders were wary. All five stopped in place. One drew back an arrow and fired in the direction of the sound.

The arrow passed by Obal's sleeve, making the horse start. As he brought his horse under control, Balsa heard a man call out, "I told you not to fire without permission!"

Balsa nocked an arrow back and fired at the horse of the man who had spoken. The arrow flew into the horse's shoulder; the horse's high-pitched scream echoed in the stillness. Balsa dashed out onto the road in the direction of the scouts.

"Don't move! We have arrows trained on you!" Balsa shouted in Yogoese. The scouts could see her, but Obal and Gashu were still hidden in the grove. They had seen an arrow emerge from the grove, though, so they could assume that Balsa's comrades were close.

"We have no desire to kill you," Balsa said. "Who are you? What do you want?"

The scouts blinked in surprise at Balsa's words. They hadn't expected to encounter a woman with a bow trained on them in the middle of the night.

The man who had fired the first shot faced Balsa and said in clipped Yogoese, "You first. Who are you?"

"We're guards who've been hired by the people in Shirogai," Balsa said. "You seem to be with the regular army, so my guess is that you've been sent to Shirogai ahead of everyone else. We're not your enemies, and neither are the people of Shirogai. You're welcome in the city as long as you don't attack anyone."

The man who led the riders looked at the ground. "I should talk to our captain," he said. "He'll want to know about this."

"Sure." Balsa nodded.

The man turned his horse and melted into the darkness, followed by the other riders.

Obal and Gashu rode out onto the path. "Are we sure he's going to tell his captain?"

Balsa shrugged. "If they're Yogoese, I'm sure they're going to burn Shirogai regardless, no matter what he says to his captain. And if they're spies for the Talsh, attacking them would only turn them against the people of Shirogai. We want to avoid that."

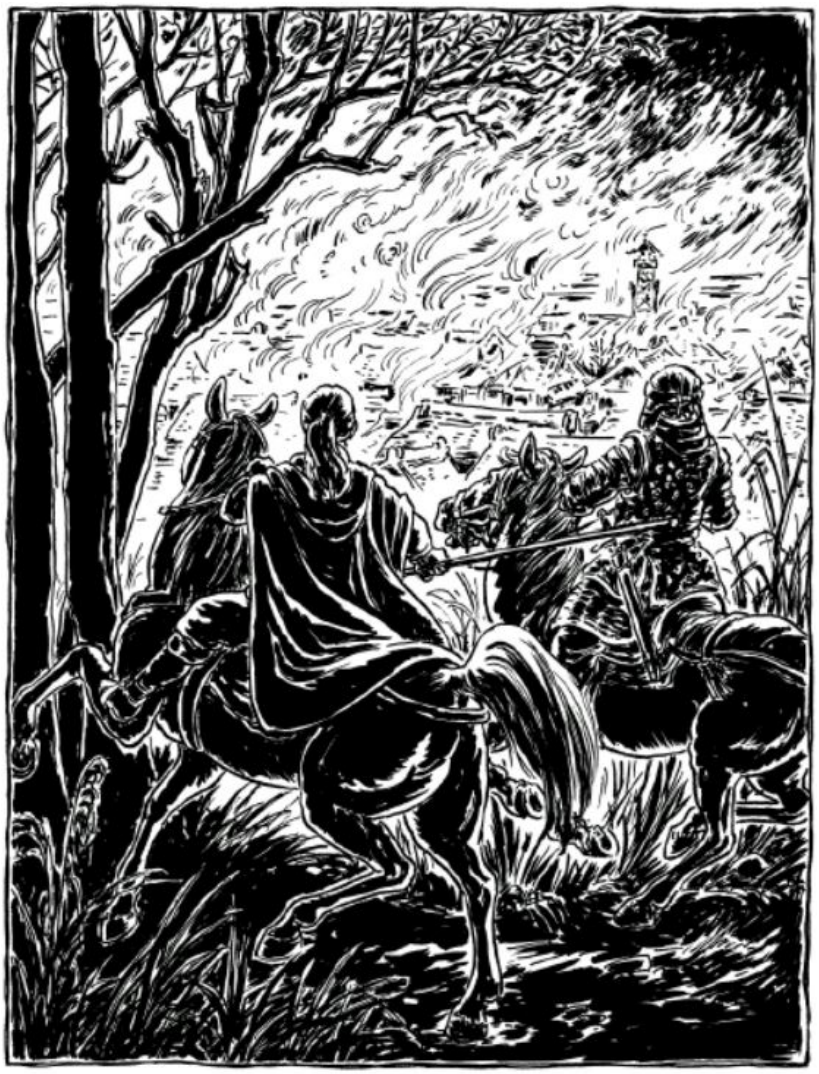
Balsa shifted her horse into the middle of the path, then said, "Let's get back to Shirogai."

Balsa, Gashu and Obal rode for a short while in the darkness before they smelled smoke. A billowing cloud of ash extended up to the sky.

Shirogai was already on fire.

Balsa gaped up at the sky in amazement. *The soldiers must have taken the food and supplies we gathered up, and then burned the city anyway.* She clenched her fist.

Gashu and Obal stopped their horses and blinked smoke out of their eyes. Red flames licked at the buildings of the city.



"Shit," Obal said.

"Did those men we passed do this?" Gashu asked in a tone of outrage.

Most of the guards in Shirogai were poor men without much by way of social standing. Bodyguards were a proud and stubborn breed, but most of them came from merchant or farming families. Some had joined the army to receive a salary and a better position in the world. They thought not only of themselves, but of their wives and children.

The Yogoese army wasn't a meritocracy. Even the best guards had to obey the commands of their noble officers. Many men disliked this, but there were many men for whom joining the army provided great benefits.

Obal's brother had joined the army to escape his wandering life. He was in the imperial army. Obal found it hard to believe that his brother would have obeyed orders to burn Shirogai with him in it, but those orders had definitely been given, and obeyed.

"I don't see many people," Balsa said. "Most of them probably fled when they caught sight of the torches, but they didn't have much warning. We need to hurry and try to save everyone we can."

Obal and Gashu nodded, then urged their horses to go faster. Balsa galloped ahead of them.

As Balsa and the others got closer to the city, the smoke became thicker. They saw no other people. The wind was a roaring gale that made the fire spread wildly in all directions. Shirogai looked wavy from heat haze. It had stood in this spot for a hundred years, but now all that history and proud merchant tradition was gone in a flash.

"No one stayed here," Balsa shouted out. "They couldn't! Head for the valley!"

Gashu and Obal exchanged uncomfortable glances, then nodded.

Sure enough, there were a number of people clustered on the narrow mountain road leading into a wide valley just outside the city. These were the stragglers who had made it out of the city last, escaping with their lives and little else. Balsa, Obal and Gashu rode among them, helping to guide them away from the burning city.

Balsa had traveled through the Samal Pass many times, as had her companions, so they were able to find the way, even at night. It was slow going, though. Many of the unfortunate people who had fled fell too far back, so Balsa was forced to patrol around the group to make sure no one got separated from the main group.

This wasn't an easy bodyguarding job. People were unhappy and on edge; they weren't in any mood to cooperate or follow instructions.

"Obal," Balsa said, "go ahead to the valley with Gashu and bring back a few helpers for this group. Please? I don't want to lose anyone here."

Gashu rubbed at his beard with his white shirt. "Well, there's one bit of good news. The soldiers did their business and are riding the other way. It should be pretty easy to reach the border now."

Balsa smiled bitterly. Like her, Gashu was a good bodyguard. He was considering the safety of his charges over everything else.

Gashu and the other guards pitched tents to turn in for the night after they and the survivors of the city had fled far enough to escape the ash and smoke in the air. Balsa entered Gashu's tent to talk about how they intended to lead everyone to the Samal Pass. She passed many merchants who had lost everything. They reminded her of Martha and the good people from the Samada Store. These people didn't deserve this suffering at all.

Martha and her son Toun had made it out safely. Martha was the one who had told her son to take only what he could carry and run. They had managed to get five carts and three wagons out of Shirogai, crammed with food and supplies and precious cloth and inventory that they could use to create a new store elsewhere.

Martha had also insisted on giving Balsa and the guards her signboards and extra cloth to create more tents. "Leave this to us, Balsa," Martha had called out in a clear voice. "We'll make sure everyone has a place to sleep."

As Balsa approached Gashu's tent, she noticed that many tents had been made with the signboards and cloth, not just from Martha's store but also from several others. The letters and devices on the signs acted as landmarks; people used them to find their friends and family in the darkness.

The Samada Store's people were staying in five tents. Four of them were dark, but Balsa saw a light shining inside one. As Balsa was passing by, Martha and Toun lifted the tent flap and beckoned to her.

"Balsa," Toun whispered. His face was very pale. "The city burned...is it true? It doesn't seem real..."

"It all burned," Balsa answered quietly. "By the time I got there, it was a sea of fire."

Martha looked at the ground, crestfallen. Balsa had never seen her look so upset before. She understood why, of course, but she wished for Martha to regain some of her former strength and resiliency, and quickly.

"I wanted to talk to you," Balsa said. Asra and Chikisa were Tal people, so it might be difficult for them to travel with all the people of Shirogai, since Rotans were highly prejudiced against Tal people. Martha kept them hidden in their own tent for now, but Balsa also laid out some plans to keep them safe in the future.

There were other things that Balsa wanted to discuss as well, including Asra and Chikisa's relation to Prince Ihan, the nature of the conflict between the Northern and Southern Clan Lords in Rota, and the alliance between Rota and Kanbal.

Balsa told Toun and Martha all about the proposed alliance, though she left Chagum out of the story; he didn't want anyone in New Yogo to know that he was alive yet. She also told Martha that the best place for her to settle in Rota was Jitan, Rota's ancient capital. Prince Ihan had his castle there. It was a bustling market town, just like Shirogai had been.

"Northern Rota isn't as wealthy as southern Rota as a rule, but if anything bad happens, Prince Ihan will keep you and the children safe. I'm absolutely certain of that," Balsa said.

Martha shook her head. "We'll have time to consider all that later, when we actually get to Rota," she said. "Chikisa and Asra don't want to rely on Prince Ihan, so it might be better for us to avoid Jitan."

Balsa remembered how Chikisa had refused Ihan's help the last time he and Asra were in Jitan. She frowned. "You may be right."

Martha looked exhausted, but she managed a slight smile. "I do have trade contacts, in Jitan and elsewhere. I'm sure that everything will work out in the end, for me and all these merchants."

"But the children are a burden to you right now..." Balsa bit her lip.

"Don't be ridiculous," Martha said. "You entrusted them to me, and even if you hadn't, they're a great help and no trouble. I know you're concerned for them as well as me, but don't worry about that, Balsa. We can take care of ourselves."

Martha paused. When she spoke again, her voice was hoarse and quiet. "Besides, you have to look for Tanda, Balsa. Though you'll probably find him on the battlefield."

Balsa attempted a smile. "I'll find him." Tanda was all right. He had to be.

Chapter 7 - Retreat and Advance

The next morning, the scouts that had ridden ahead to investigate the border came to the impromptu camp. Though the news that Shirogai had burned weighed heavily on everyone, the scouts were almost smiling when they shouted, "There are no guards at the Samal Pass! It's completely clear! We can all pass through! We saw the last ones retreating toward their fortress in the hills last night."

The survivors of Shirogai cheered. Balsa looked to Gashu, who nodded.

"Right," Gashu said. "Let's get everyone packed up and moving. We should go through the pass now, while we know it's unguarded."

The camp was suddenly abuzz with activity. Everyone was eager to be on the move. Balsa went to see Martha and caught sight of Asra helping to take down the Samada Store's tents. She was nodding and smiling at another girl, who was folding canvas. Balsa was gladdened by the sight. She hadn't thought Asra would ever recover so much of herself after all the terrible things that had happened to her. She hadn't even been able to eat or drink on her own for months.

Asra had suffered greatly and was scarred by her experiences, but she had learned to smile again. Someday, her voice might return as well. Balsa understood that she was fine here, and safe.

Asra felt eyes on her and glanced over at Balsa. There was uncertainty in her large, dark eyes.

Balsa approached Asra and rested her hand gently on Asra's head. "I'm sorry that I can't go with you," she said. "Really, I am."

Asra frowned, then pressed her head into Balsa's chest, pulling her into a hug.

"If I live through the war, I'll come to Rota to visit you. I promise," Balsa said. "Stay safe until then."

Balsa felt Asra nod against her chest. They stood there, hugging, for a long time.

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It was a very sunny day. If there had been no war, many people would likely have been passing through the Samal Pass on a day like today. As it was, only the survivors from Shirogai traveled the narrow road to the pass.

Balsa sat atop her horse, watching the long procession of merchants, civilians and guards pass through the gate checkpoint that marked the pass. Obal was among the last people through. When she made no move to follow, Obal said, "Balsa, come with us. There might be trouble ahead, and I'd feel better with you among us."

Balsa chuckled, then shook her head. "Take care of everyone," she said. "They're counting on you."

Obal sighed, but he nodded, then rode away. He and Balsa made no promises to see one another again. Bodyguards never made such promises; their work was too dangerous and there were no guarantees. Balsa prayed that Obal, the other guards, and the people of Shirogai would find someplace safe. Rota was embroiled in civil war at the moment. It was safer than New Yogo, but only in a relative sense.

Chagum might be in Jitan already. He'd crossed the mountains in Kanbal, traveling light and accompanied by Kanbalese cavalry forces. She couldn't believe that Chagum was riding at the head of an army now. He hated killing; he also hated giving people orders. He would return to his homeland with a foreign army at his back to fight back against the Talsh.

Balsa watched the people of Shirogai pass into Rota for a bit longer. Then she put her hand on her horse's neck and turned it. She had to get to the Tarano Plains. She rode past Shirogai, back to the fortress she'd seen before. There was smoke rising from behind the walls of the fortress. Perhaps the Talsh had already attacked it.

Toun had told her that if Tanda was alive, he would either be in one of the fortresses near Shirogai or lying injured on the Tarano Plains. If the fortress had been attacked, she didn't expect there would be survivors. She turned her horse onto the road and galloped in the direction of the Tarano Plains.

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The people of Shirogai went through the Samal Pass and got on the Yamushil Highway that led into northern Rota. A bit farther down the road, the highway split into two. The guards guided the people onto the Rakul Road, which led to Jitan, where Prince Ihan's castle was. The Rakul Province of Rota was mainly agricultural, with wide fields of grass and deep forests, but there were several large trading cities like Toluan that lay along their route.

Balsa had told Gashu and Obal everything she knew about the situation in Rota before her departure, so Gashu and Aoun, the leader of Shirogai, decided to head for Jitan first. Not everyone wanted to go to Jitan, and Aoun and the guards didn't force them to stay with the group, so a few people peeled off and settled at each new town and city that they passed through. People who had no place to go in Rota accompanied the guards to Jitan. The guards didn't have much of a plan beyond getting to Jitan and keeping everyone safe.

The poor Rotan herders were always stunned at the number of refugees when the people of Shirogai passed them by. They often offered help and shelter, though they couldn't spare much. Shirogai's people slept in their huts or outside their homes in tents.

At a fork in the road, some of the guards rode ahead of the rest of the people to scout the way. One of them stopped dead in his tracks when he saw something shining right in the middle of the road. When he identified the shining metal as tack on a soldier's horse, he signaled the other scouts and rode hastily back to camp.

The scout sought out Gashu immediately.

"What's wrong?" Gashu asked. "Did something happen?"

"Riders are coming," the scout said. "I saw them just ahead. There are a lot of them, though I didn't get an exact count."

"Riders? Are they bandits, then? Or part of an army?"

"I don't think they were bandits," the scout said. "Their armor was finely made and all in the same style. My guess would be that they're army men, though they definitely weren't Yogoese."

Gashu called the other guards together and said, "We need more information about what's ahead. We're all going to investigate, but keep off the road and in the tall grass so that you won't be seen. If they start heading toward the fields where the people of Shirogai are, rush back and mount up. I want us to be between them and any army that comes along. Understood?"

The guards nodded, then rushed off to begin scouting the area.

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The army did start heading for the the fields, so Gashu and the other guards mounted up and prepared to meet them. The people of Shirogai either remained in their tents or crouched down far behind the guards.

The rider leading the cavalrymen seemed surprised at seeing so many people in his path. Gashu rode ahead of the guards protecting Shirogai's people and hailed the rider in Yogoese.

"Are you Yogoese?" the rider asked.

"Yes," Gashu said. "We've only just fled from New Yogo. Our city, Shirogai, was burned by New Yogo's soldiers to prevent it from falling into Talsh hands."

The Rotan riders exchanges glances of alarm. Three of them rode back further into the ranks while their leader ordered the other men to march along the road, leaving Shirogai's people alone. The army didn't march quickly, but steadily; they had come a long way and would march farther still.

After a little while, the three riders that the leader had sent away returned, along with big, burly men carrying spears. Gashu had assumed that this army was Rotan, but he was wrong: it was Kanbalese. The strangest thing was that the man riding behind the spear-wielders wasn't Kanbalese, but Yogoese.

The man wore polished armor like the rest of the army, but he didn't look as comfortable in his seat, perhaps because he was so much younger than the others. He couldn't be any older than twenty years old.

Gashu stood up straight as the young man approached him. There was a sword hanging from his hip.

"I heard you fled from New Yogo," the young man said. "Are you the leader of all these people?" He spoke in the high register of nobles.

Gashu blinked, then nodded his head, though he didn't want to speak for Shirogai without Aoun being present. Aoun rushed forward at Gashu's signal.

"I lead the guards," Gashu said. "Aoun leads the people of the city."

The young man nodded. "Tell me what happened to Shirogai."

Aoun told the young man everything that had happened over the past few days. The young man listened quietly, occasionally asking a question for clarification. When he heard that it was the Yogoese soldiers who had burned Shirogai and not the Talsh, his eyes flashed with sudden sadness and rage.

After Aoun finished telling the young man what had happened, the young man pulled up on his reins a bit and looked out at all the people

of Shirogai, who were still camped in the grassy field. He nodded to himself, then dismounted.

The spearmen who acted as the young man's escorts prepared to dismount as well, but he stopped them with a hand gesture. "Tell everyone that we're taking a break," the young man said in Rotan. "Just a short one; no more than thirty minutes. Ask Lieutenant Karon and General Kahm to come here. I want them to walk through the camp with me. Oraku, I want to write a message. Bring my writing tools."

The riders scrambled to obey the young man's orders. The young man faced Aoun again and removed his helmet. "I'll give you a letter from me to Prince Ihan," he said. "He's promised to take care of all the war refugees from New Yogo, at least until the war is over. You can deliver it to him in his castle at Jitan. I pray that you won't run into any more trouble on your journey."

One of the young man's guards brought a folding chair and desk and set them up in front of Aoun. The young man sat down and started composing a message in Rotan on parchment. When the young man signed the message and he saw the name, Aoun froze to the ground.

The young man stared calmly back at him. Aoun looked pointedly at he ground.

"You can look at me," the young man said. "I have no power to strike you dead with just a look. That idea was always foolish superstition, nothing more."

Aoun shook all over and didn't look up. "You...you're...alive?"

"I'm alive," Crown Prince Chagum said. "I jumped into the sea, and made it here."

Crown Prince Chagum stood up, then sealed the message neatly with hot wax, which he pushed the hilt of his sword into to leave a seal impression. He passed it to Aoun, then removed one of his own heavy saddlebags from his horse, which he gave to Gashu.

"I hope these supplies will be useful to the people of Shirogai," Crown Prince Chagum said. "I only wish that I had more to give. Their homes are gone, and they're going to have to make a living in a new land, at least for a while." He sighed. "The army you see is the combined forces of the King of Rota and the King of Kanbal. We're marching to New Yogo to save the country from the Talsh invasion. I sincerely believe that you'll all be able to go home one day. Until then, do your best to survive."

Crown Prince Chagum mounted up and took his place among the other men of the army. "We're getting closer to Samal Pass," he said. "Tell everyone to get ready to move again. We should be in New Yogo by nightfall."

Lieutenant Karon nodded.

Some of Shirogai's people cheered as the army passed. The cheer spread, growing louder in intensity. Chagum listened to their cheers, but he was not encouraged. He urged his horse onward with a darkness in his eyes and in his heart.

Part 2: Transcending Death

Chapter 1 - Homecoming

Chagum hadn't been home in two years. His eyes passed over the mountain streams and the lush green forest in the spring sunlight. It looked like many places he'd seen in Rota, but everything seemed greener now: more vivid and alive.

The sun shone on the new leaves of the trees and left dappled patterns on the ground.

"You can see the smoke from here," Kahm said. Hagu Muro had ordered Kahm Musa to keep Chagum safe, so Kahm rarely left his right side. Lieutenant Karon belonged to the Rotan army and rode on his left.

"According to the refugees from Shirogai, the Talsh attacked the fort near their city five days ago."

Chagum nodded. "The people camped at a place not too far from the city. Let's try to find their camp and stop there for the evening."

Karon and Kahm nodded.

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After the army had set up their tents near the burned-out Shirogai, Chagum was able to spend some time alone. He wiped off the grime and sweat of the road with a clean, wet cloth, then changed his clothes and got into bed.

Chagum was exhausted, but he couldn't sleep. The army camp was loud. Chagum listened to the camp sounds and stared into the darkness.

I'm finally home.

Chagum had wanted nothing else for more than two years, and now, he was finally here--back in New Yogo. Prince Ihan had kept the promise he'd made many years ago and agreed to Chagum's proposed alliance. With Kanbal and Rota united, they could form a wall to protect the northern continent against the Talsh invasion.

Chagum sent messages to Ihan via the hawk of the leader of the Kashal. The man was named Sufar; the hawk was named Shau. Sending messages that way was three times faster than sending them overland. If Prince Raul learned of the Kashal's extra abilities, he would likely capture or eliminate them as quickly as possible.

Chagum wondered how much his home had changed in his absence. He wasn't sure he wanted to find out. He lay back on his bed and thought about everything that had gotten him to this place.

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Chagum had arrived in Jitan at the head of an army of fifteen thousand cavalrymen. Prince Ihan knew he was coming; he'd received the message via Sufar's hawk. News of the large army spread to the southern clan lords, and from there to the Talsh spies who were operating in Rota.

The southern clan lords, especially Lord Suan, were beginning to understand that there was no way for them to win in this war. King Yosam was deathly ill, and they could not support Prince Ihan, whom they detested. But Talsh also didn't have their best interests at heart.

Prince Ihan was also shrewd. The southern clan lords had started the civil war, so King Yosam had signed a decree that condemned them as rebels and traitors. All the official soldiers in the King's army, including those stationed in southern Rota, were automatically conscripted to fight for the north. Soldiers who chose to fight for the southern clan lords would also be considered traitors to the nation. Since King Yosam was too weak to fight on the battlefield, Prince Ihan commanded his armies in his stead.

At first, the King's decree caused great confusion all over the nation. Eventually, Prince Ihan imposed order and split the army into three groups. Twenty thousand men were held in reserve to pacify Rota and keep the southern clan lords under control. Fifty thousand men were sent south to the border with Sangal to reinforce the Yogoese army there. Fifteen thousand were given to Chagum to command in defense of his homeland. King Yosam supported Prince Ihan in everything, and vice versa, so he wrote a letter for Chagum proposing an alliance with New Yogo, addressed to the Mikado. The words in King Yosam's letter pierced Chagum to the heart.

If your nation falls, the rest of the northern continent falls with it. To save Rota and Kanbal, New Yogo must be saved first. I have heard that the Talsh command an army of two hundred thousand men, but the men mustering on the Sangal peninsula number scarcely sixty thousand. My scouts inform me that thirty thousand of these have been commanded to invade New Yogo. They cannot commit that entire force to invasion. Sangal's islands are not fully pacified; Talsh will be forced to hold many men in reserve to maintain their grip on them.

If we fail to defend our nations, we will become like Sangal, consumed by their cruel oppressors. In tarzu, one player may turn many other pieces to his own side. Players win through overwhelming the enemy's numbers.

I beg you to heed the words of your son, Crown Prince Chagum. Together, you have the ability to change the fate of the world.

Prince Ihan read through the letter, then commanded Lieutenant Karon to accompany Chagum. Karon was thirty years old. He was a clever man and a skilled military strategist. He'd proven himself useful immediately by working through all the logistics required to march a force of fifteen thousand men to New Yogo.

Prince Ihan wasn't committed to saving New Yogo, exactly. He was more concerned with the Talsh threat and civil war in his own land. Still, he was willing to help Chagum to the best of his ability, for his brother's sake and the sake of the continent.

The King of Kanbal's forces, which also numbered fifteen thousand, were of of a similar mind. Their leaders were Kahm and Hagu Muro, who were both King's Spears. "We've committed our army to your cause to defend Kanbal and the king," Hagu Muro said. "If the lands below the Misty Blue Mountains are threatened by hostile enemies, it makes sense for our army to repel them before they can reach our country's border." He scratched at his thick beard.

As he spoke, Chagum got the strange sense that Kanbal, Rota and New Yogo had, for all intents and purposes, had become a single nation with a single will. All they wanted to do was defeat the Talsh. Kanbal and Rota had already joined forces. All that was left was to convince New Yogo to join the alliance. Chagum rode to his homeland with an

escort of three thousand men selected from both the Kanbalese and Rotan armies. The fifty thousand men sent to reinforce the Sangal border were already through Nabal Pass, far to the south. Prince Ihan had also deployed the Rotan navy to protect the coast.

Prolonging the war would be dangerous, and not just for obvious reasons. Talsh was an incredible sea power. With New Yogo invaded and destroyed, the continent's main source of food would be unavailable. If southern Rota fell under Talsh command as well, it was likely that all the armies would starve. Other supplies would be short, too, if trade routes were cut off by sea.

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Chagum learned of New Yogo's crushing defeat at the Tarano Plains via a message sent by Sufar. Thirty thousand Talsh had engaged twenty-five thousand Yogoese in fierce combat, but the battle hadn't lasted long. Talsh casualties, including both injuries and deaths, numbered something like eight thousand. Yogoese deaths and injuries were three times that. The few surviving soldiers retreated to a fortress to the south, following the imperial highway.

The imperial highway led directly to Kosenkyo. The enemy would soon be at the Mikado's doorstep. The Talsh army had bypassed Shirogai and the merchant cities completely, intent on capturing their target.

Prince Raul had sent messengers to the imperial palace in Kosenkyo. Like Prince Ihan, Prince Raul employed many spies, like Hugo Arayutan, who had captured Chagum and brought him to Talsh

some years before. Sufar guesses that the spies had already reported all of the city's weak points to Prince Raul.

For your foolish act of pointless resistance, I could order your family's palace burned. Maybe I'll have the soldiers cut your mother's ears off and sever all of your little sister's limbs while you watch and listen to their screams. You have no way to defend them—or yourself. New Yogo knows nothing of war.

Prince Raul had said that to Chagum when they'd met. Chagum thought of his mother and sister and closed his eyes. He didn't want to think about what would happen if he was too late to save the palace.

Chagum dreamed of men on horseback clomping through the wilderness. He heard their horses snorting and their tack jangling as they moved. Suddenly, they were all on the ground: horses, men, and tack all: all dead. None of them moved. He was the only one left.

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The next day dawned gray and cheerless. Cold mist soaked Chagum's boots through. Scouts returned from the fortress near Shirogai to report on the situation there.

The soldiers in the fortress had surrendered long since; there was no sign of the Talsh army anywhere. "We should ride out today, Your Majesty," one of the scouts said in a grim tone.

"Why?" Chagum asked. "It's raining; won't our coats and equipment be ruined?"

"The equipment is made to withstand bad weather," the scout said. "But you should push past the fortress before the rest of the army passes through. There are things there that would be better not to see."

Chagum swallowed in alarm, then shook his head. "No. I will advance with the rest of the army and see the fortress. I understand that it may be terrible, but they are soldiers that were wounded or killed in battle. Seeing them is a matter of honor."

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Chagum rode up to the fortress flanked by Kahm and Karon. The first thing he noticed was a terrible smell. His heartbeat faltered for a moment. The smell was complex, but the overwhelming scent that reached his nose was that of rot. He heard birds calling out softly to one another in the worsening rain as he advanced.

The fortress was not as bad as he expected. It was worse. Corpses lined the street or were piled up haphazardly in it. A flock of crows was startled by the advancing riders and flew off in a panic.

Kahm made a strangled sound in his throat. One of the riders in front of them rapidly dismounted and vomited onto the street.

"Maybe we shouldn't have come after all, Your Majesty," Karon said. He was very pale.

Chagum's overwhelming emotion was not disgust, but rage. He removed his helmet without saying a word, then removed his shuma face covering from his saddlebag and put it on. He kept his grip tightly on his horse's reins, one-handed.

The street was full of nothing but corpses, so he had no desire to advance, but he gritted his teeth and made his resolve. He patted the neck of his horse to soothe it, then rode through the sea of dead that surrounded him.

Some of the bodies nearest the walls of the fortress wore Talsh armor. Men were stuck full of arrows like pincushions. Others had died when burning oil or tar was poured over their heads from above.

"I thought we were fighting the Talsh," Karon muttered. "Isn't their skin ruddy and somewhat darker than ours? But many of the men wearing Talsh armor look Yogoese, don't they?"

"They are Yogoese," Chagum said. "Talsh conquered Old Yogo a long time ago. And those men," he said, pointing to others on the battlefield, "are from Orm. I recognize the design on their armor." There were almost no recognizably Talsh bodies. Nearly all of the enemy dead were either Yogoese or Ormese.

Chagum stopped his horse, swallowing heavily. "This is what happens to the people who are conquered by Talsh. They're sent off to die and eaten by crows. We can't let it happen to New Yogo." Tears fell down his cheeks.

"What did they die for?!" he yelled. "Tell me what the point of all this was!"

Karon gripped Chagum's shoulder. Chagum wiped his tears away and sat up straight. He turned his attention to the shattered gates in front of the fortress.

Inside the fortress, all of the corpses belonged to New Yogo's army. They'd been burned, stabbed, dismembered…many bodies were scattered in pieces. The remaining walls that still stood were black with remembered fire. Some corpses had been burned to ash, leaving only bones behind.

Though the sight before him was terrifyingly grim, by some mercy, Chagum seemed to have lost his sense of smell. He felt like all his senses were dulled and that he was seeing in black and white. His hands, feet and neck were all freezing cold. His armor felt heavy. It was hard to breathe.

All these men had died because of his father. His father had not prevented it. He'd done nothing to stop it.

Chagum advanced a little farther, then looked over his shoulder. His escort trailed after him like a line of ants. He trembled all over and clamped down on himself, trying desperately to keep still.

The Talsh army was ahead of them now. How many days behind were they? And when they caught up, wouldn't the Talsh army do the same to them as the soldiers here? Chagum shut his eyes tight and ordered himself not to think about it. He felt like the fog was soaking the corpse smell into his bones.

He remembered something that Shuga had told him once, so long ago that he thought he'd forgotten. *Your Majesty is the child of a god. You must never come into contact with anything impure, so that your soul will not be corrupted and polluted by the ugliness of the world. Your father is not a person, but a god, you see. He is the pure soul of our entire nation, and the source of New Yogo's great pride.*

Is it possible for the soul to be corrupted by the sight of something like this? Chagum thought.

Chagum looked up at the sky. A hawk flew far over his head, but it was coming closer fast. Chagum extended his arm so that the hawk could land. It was Shau, Sufar's hawk. He beat his wings a few times, then settled onto his perch. Shau was a maro hawk. Their eyes were far better than humans'. Sufar claimed that maro hawks had the best eyes among birds. He would know; as leader of the Kashal, he could attach his spirit to that of animals and control their movements, though only with the complete trust of the animal involved. Sufar had trained many hawks over the years, but Shau was his favorite.

"Sufar? Are you in there?" Chagum asked.

Shau let out a short, high-pitched screech. There was a message in Shau's talons, secured by metal fastenings. When Chagum opened it, he saw a message in Rotan as well as a detailed map.

"You've already scouted this place?" Chagum asked.

Shau screeched again.

"Did Sufar send us something?" Karon asked, riding up to Chagum's side. "What is it?" Kahm also rode up, looking askance at Chagum.

The message was a report from Sufar. Chagum scanned it, then said, "The army that attacked this place is already fighting at Yazuno's fortress. After Yazuno falls—and it will—the Talsh will be able to enter Kosenkyo without further resistance." He paused. "That's not all. The force that Prince Ihan sent southward to reinforce the border was attacked by an army of twelve thousand Talsh soldiers before they could get there. Ten thousand Talsh troops resupplied at the Tarano Plains and are already heading for the capital."

Kahm looked over Chagum's shoulder at the map Sufar had drawn and frowned. "The Talsh army marches from Yazuno to the west and the Tarano Plains to the east," he said. "Kosenkyo will be attacked from both sides."

"Sufar writes that only a few hundred men attacked the fortress we're standing in. The rest advanced past the fortress with the rest of the western army before the battle was even over," Chagum said. "The western army numbers something like twenty thousand men."

And the eastern army numbered ten thousand. Kosenkyo would be attacked by thirty thousand Talsh soldiers. Chagum closed his eyes and thought for a moment. When he opened his eyes, he faced Karon and

said, "We have to move. If we don't beat the Talsh to Kosenkyo, it's all over. We can't rest until we get there."

Chagum looked down at the map in his hand, which was slowly being soaked by the rain. Kosenkyo looked like a beast trapped in a net. The combined Rotan and Kanbalese armies had to break through that net before it closed completely shut. He rolled up the map and handed it to Karon. Then he stroked Shau gently on the head and say, "Thank Sufar for me. I'm very glad you've agreed to lend us your eyes."

The sound Shau made was almost like a cheep as he spread his wings and launched off of Chagum's arm.

Chapter 2 - Chagum's First Battle

An enormous stone soared through the air with a whoosh of speed. The archers on the walls rushed to get out of the way, but many were crushed by the falling stones. General Rokusam watched in horror with his hands shaking.

"Don't panic!" he barked. "Fire! Light your arrows on fire and shoot!" His voice broke, but he was loud enough to be heard over the din. The stone walls of the fortress crumbled under the assault of the Talsh catapults. The archers had no place to hide and were completely exposed to enemy fire.

The fortress at Yazuno was close to the Blue Bow River. Many large stones lined the riverbanks in this area, so the Talsh had plenty of ammunition for their catapults. The sound of the Talsh war drums reverberated in the air. They had crossed over the mountains at sunset, carrying their unspeakably huge war machines. Rokusam wouldn't have believed that they could move with such heavy things if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes.

Rakusam didn't know that the catapults and war machines were mostly made of wood and could be easily disassembled. They were assembled on the battlefield in places where it was difficult for enemy forces—especially enemy archers—to reach. These war machines were one of the reasons Talsh was an unmatched opponent in war.

Though it was almost nightfall, the Talsh did not hesitate and attacked the fortress immediately. The Yogoese archers had fire arrows, but so did the Talsh, and Talsh's arrows found their marks in the

wooden support beams and interior places that had been shored up haphazardly before the war. The stone walls crumbled while the reinforced beams and struts burned.

In the gathering darkness, it was difficult to tell how large the army was. All Rokusam saw was that more and more Talsh kept appearing, marching down out of the mountains and the hills. They had set up their catapults first, then brought out barrels of oil and set them on fire to make it easier for their archers to light their arrows on fire. Then, they rolled another barrel of oil up to the main gates of the fortress, soaked the gates in oil and set them aflame. They had already defeated many fortresses in New Yogo using similar methods.

The gates of the fortress burned, then collapsed inwards. Rokusam watched as enemy archers poured through the open gate, their shadows lengthening behind them.

The Talsh brought ladders forward to lean against the walls of the fortress. Rokusam waved his sword wildly and yelled, "Push the ladders off! Aim for the ones holding them! They're going to use the ladders to get their men up here!"

The Yogoese soldiers pushed the ladders off the wall, but the Talsh soldiers maintained their grip even when the ladders fell backwards. Their comrades kept the ladders stable at the base. Many Talsh entered the fortress via ladder, drawing swords when they reached the walls and cutting down anyone in their path.

Rokusam's guards continued to protect him, but their footing atop the wall was becoming precarious. There was a terrible boom coming from outside the gate.

Is it over already? Have we lost?

The Talsh poured into the fortress like an army of ants. Rokusam felt something like courage break within himself. He likely wouldn't live to see the dawn. He would die in the darkness.

The Talsh swords were wide and curved strangely, unlike the straighter Yogoese swords. Rokusam had trained with the sword for many years, but he'd never fought in an actual battle. He waved his weapon about, narrowly managing to defeat his opponents with the help of his more experienced guards. After dispatching his attackers, Rokusam called a retreat and ran deeper into the fortress.

Panic and the smell of blood went to Rokusam's head as he fled, slaying enemies in a desperate panic. He was on the ground now with his back to the outer walls of the fortress. He looked over his shoulder and gasped.

The Talsh were loading their catapults again. He could see the stones being loaded and pulled back through the gaps in the fortress' walls. All at once, the catapults released their projectiles, sending forth a rain of stone. Time slowed down. Rokusam almost thought that he was seeing things; none of this could be real.

Suddenly, a flaming cloud of arrows soared into the air from the fortress' right side. All the arrows were aimed at the Talsh catapults. They struck their targets with a loud snapping sound. After the first volley, nearly all of the catapults were on fire. In mere moments, they'd become completely unusable.

The Talsh army suddenly lost focus. This wasn't in their battle plans. A second set of flaming arrows descended, this time on the Talsh

soldiers attacking what remained of the fortress walls. The Talsh army formed up and raised their shields, but they couldn't see their new attackers in the dark. The arrows came from all over, so they couldn't even tell which direction the fortress' reinforcements had come from. As arrows continued to fly, more and more Talsh soldiers collapsed to the ground, dead, with their shields on fire.

Rokusam heard screams from all around him. The rhythm of the Talsh war drums changed, giving the soldiers new orders. The Talsh army assumed a protective formation around their own archers, with shield-bearers rushing toward a central spot on the battlefield to form a wall. When most of the Talsh soldiers were protected behind the shields, they advanced on the fortress in lockstep, slowly but steadily.

They're planning to attack as a single force. Rokusam caught his breath. It was the best way to protect their men from enemy fire while also pressing the attack.

There was a loud shout like a cry. It wasn't a scream. When Rokusam looked around for the source of the cry, he saw a man standing atop the single remaining watchtower. He sent up a cheer, then shouted at the top of his voice, "Reinforcements! Reinforcements have come! We're saved!"

Rokusam looked out at the battlefield. Distantly, behind the Talsh line, he saw the glint of spearheads in the light of the battle fires.

Impossible. This must be a dream.

The reinforcements were marching from the south and not from the capital. Who were they? Who had sent them?

The Talsh were in defensive formation to protect the line from arrows; they couldn't shift fast enough to prevent the reinforcements from skewering them in the back with their spears. The reinforcements advanced into the light of the flaming catapults as the soldiers of the Talsh army screamed in agony.

The soldiers Rokusam saw didn't belong to the Yogoese army. They were Rotans. The Rotan cavalry had come to reinforce them right in the nick of time. "It's the Rotan army!" Rokusam belted out. His guards formed up around him facing the battlefield, no less stunned than he was. "Protect the fortress! Trap the Talsh army between our line and the reinforcements!"

The Yogoese soldiers at the fortress moved as if they'd just returned to life.

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Chagum's first battle began at sunset.

After receiving word that the fortress at Yazuno was under attack, Chagum consulted with his lieutenants. Kahm and Hagu Muro took the Kanbalese cavalry to attack the Talsh supply train while Chagum and Karon led the Rotan forces to the fortress, following the line of the Blue Bow River. Chagum was careful to place himself behind the Talsh forces to protect the Kanbalese cavalry while they made their attack.

Chagum considered tactics with Karon as he rode toward the fortress. "It was built high in the valley, so any attackers will need to fight uphill and risk being picked off by arrows. If we time things right, we might be able to trap the Talsh army between us and the fortress

walls. They won't have anywhere to run. The path to Yazuno is reinforced and very narrow, so I don't think they'll be able to cut a way past us."

Karon agreed with his assessment and offered some advice on how to move their own forces without being seen. It was fortunate that the sun was going down.

"It's a good plan," Chagum said. "When we're in position, order the men to use fire arrows on the catapults."

"Fire arrows?" Karon looked troubled. "We have no oil or means of making them on a large scale. Not just that, they're hard to handle safely, especially for archers that aren't used to them."

Chagum nodded. "I understand that, but we need them. You read about the catapults the Talsh use in Sufar's report. They're made of wood and the projectiles they launch do so by means of thick rope. Both rope and wood will burn, destroying the catapults."

Karon's expression lightened as he understood Chagum's plan. "We must notify the archers at once and gather all the arrows we can. If we travel through the mountains, we should be able to avoid being seen. I'll give the orders immediately."

And so, Chagum rode with the Rotan cavalry as they snaked their way through the mountains in front of the fortress. The fortress was on fire; it glowed red in the darkness. There were still Yogoese soldiers protecting it from the walls, but they seemed impossibly far away. Ladders were set up along the walls to either side of the gate. Chagum saw Talsh soldiers climbing up the ladders to attack the men standing on the walls.

Karon called out, "The men in the fortress can only beat back the enemy from range! Wait until the Talsh line gathers together in one group, then attack!"

The cavalrymen who bore spears rode to the front while the archers lined up behind them. This was the first battle many of them had fought, too.

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Chagum waited on horseback behind the spearmen and archers of the Rotan army.

"You shouldn't be this far forward, Your Majesty," Kahm whispered. "It isn't safe here. Please ride farther back."

Chagum shook his head. "I'm not about to run and hide. I've never seen the Talsh fight, or the Rotan army, or our own. I need to see if I'm going to learn anything."

A scout called out, "The catapults are on fire! They're broken!"

Chagum heard the steady rhythm of the Talsh war drums quicken suddenly. He took a deep breath as the spearmen before him charged at the Talsh army from behind. Their horses galloped as fast as the wind.

The soldiers in the fortress rallied. Chagum saw ragged spearmen form a line and charge on their side, trapping the Talsh between two sets of spears. The battlefield became a muddled mess of soldiers fleeing and screaming. Several Rotan cavalrymen cheered when they saw gaps open up in the Talsh line.

But then the rhythm of the war drums changed again. Chagum realized it first. *What? New orders?* He knew that the Talsh used these drums to coordinate attacks in the middle of battle; that, too, had been in Sufar's message. Chagum watched with his mouth half-open as the formerly tight defensive line dispersed in all directions. It probably looked like the enemy was fleeing to the Rotans and Yogoese soldiers on the battlefield, but Chagum didn't think that was the case.

They're going to try to surround us instead.

Karon was in the thick of battle and hadn't noticed that the rhythm of the drums had changed yet. The Rotan army had the upper hand and focused on advancing toward the fortress. They completely missed that the Talsh were no trying to trap the combined armies.

"The Talsh are trying to form a circle around the fortress," Kahm spat. He'd remained next to Chagum as his guard. "Shit."

Chagum saw the Talsh falling back, preventing any retreat from the fortress. If he didn't act now, the armies would be cut off from behind.

Chagum drew his sword, faced the men behind him and shouted, "Rotans, to the left! Kanbalese, to the right! We have to prevent our allies from being cut off!" He kicked his horse into motion, speeding like an arrow onto the battlefield.

Kahm was right behind him. "Protect His Majesty! Disperse, left and right!"

The Kanbalese and Rotan forces split and began their own charge. Chagum gripped the hilt of his sword tightly as he entered the fiery area around the fortress gates. There were screams all around him, but he ignored them. This was his first battle. He didn't intend to lose.

Chapter 3 - Peasants and Thieves

Balsa passed through the Yauru Mountains on a narrow strip of road. She patted her exhausted horse and stopped for a brief halt. She had made good time, but there was no place to change horses in easy reach, so she had to help this one last.

She should be able to see the Tarano Plains once she passed the next mountain. Ten days had passed since the opening battle of the war. She wanted to know where the wounded and survivors had been taken.

As Balsa passed the last mountain ridge before the plains, she gasped and stopped her horse suddenly. It was just past noon, so the Tarano Plains were illuminated brilliantly in spring sunlight. The Blue Bow River, which bordered the battlefield, ran fast and strong with white rapids.

It was almost time for planting. The earth of the plain looked rich and deep, but it was fallow. She was used to seeing the rice fields below the Tohata mountain range being green with new rice plants by now, but that wasn't the case this year. What little grass there was had been trampled down heavily, as if an enormous wild beast had rampaged through the plains at great speed.

Balsa squinted and identified still shadows that lay still on the ground. There was the battlefield. She urged her horse onward and descended onto the plains. Balsa couldn't see very far ahead; the path was winding and overgrown. She crossed over many small streams and animal paths before she found a wider road that cut through the forest bordering the plains.

When she'd come as far as the foot of the Yauru Mountains, the path turned sharply to the right. It was here that she first noticed obvious signs of recent battle. She unfastened her spear in her saddle and gripped it one-handed as she rode.

Rounding the sharp turn, Balsa discovered a wagon that appeared to be full of food. Five men surrounded the wagon with their swords drawn. The terrified people in the wagon screamed, begging their attackers not to steal from them or kill them.

This area was probably a farmstead before the war started. The people inside were undoubtedly farmers, and their attackers were bandits that roamed the area around the Tarano Plains, looting the dead and stealing from survivors.

Balsa kicked her horse lightly in the side and rushed to help the farmers. She approached the bandits from behind, but she made no effort to disguise her approach. When the bandits saw an armed warrior on horseback headed straight for them, they scattered into the woods. There was a pattern on the hilt of the sword of the bandit leader that Balsa thought she recognized, but he fled before she could take a closer look.

Balsa waved her spear aloft, knocking three of the bandits down before they could flee. In an instant, they were knocked out cold at her horse's feet.

Balsa pulled up on her horse's reins in front of the wagon and looked around. She peered into the woods and chased down the two remaining bandits. She brought her spearhead to the jaw of the fourth bandit smacked him down. He also lost consciousness, hands twitching toward his bleeding face. She caught up to the bandit leader and

attacked, knocking him out as she had the first three. Then she returned to the wagon.

The family in the wagon peered at Balsa curiously.

"You should probably get moving again before they come to," Balsa said. "They won't wake up for a while, but you'll want to be far from this place when they do."

The family nodded mutely. They were still shaking as they got their horses ready to move the cart. When they were almost out of sight, a young man called out to Balsa, "Thank you! For saving us!"

"You're welcome!" she called back. "Just be safe!"

The man stopped the cart. "We should at least pay you something," he said when Balsa approached again.

"I don't need money," she said. "I'm looking for someone who was in the battle ten days ago. If you're from around here, could you tell me what happened? I have no idea where to even begin searching."

"Sure, we're from around here," the man said. "We'll tell you everything we can." His wife and another man poked their heads out of the wagon and nodded.

"I thought we were in real trouble for a minute there," the other man said. "I'm relieved that there are people like you on the road. There are a lot of people like us shipping supplies from place to place at the moment--and a lot of bandits and thieves, too."

"It seems like you're transporting food," Balsa said. "Where are you headed?"

The man looked down. "The Talsh army camp," he said.

"The Talsh army camp?" Balsa was shocked. "Is the Talsh army still camped on the Tarano Plains?"

"They are," the man said. "They marched up the imperial highway before the battle, and more men keep arriving at the camp, day by day. They have their camp near the mountains in a place called Susono. They pay well for any food that's brought to them. New Yogo's army needs food, too, but they don't pay."

The man frowned. "And you know, it's odd. I thought the Talsh were foreigners, but the ones I've seen look just like us. I heard that they were all people-eating monsters and demons, but that's not true at all."

"They also pay quite a bit for news," the first man said, "especially from the south. We've made enough to recover most of our war losses by trading with the Talsh."

Balsa listened silently, withholding judgment because she still needed more information. Besides, the men of the Talsh army were likely just as blameless as the men of New Yogo's army for the war, and no one deserved to starve to death. No one deserved to lose their homes to war, either. Balsa understood the motives of the Talsh army and this farming family perfectly.

It was lucky that no one in this family had been drafted. If one of their brothers or their father had died on the battlefield, Balsa doubted the survivors would be willing to sell food to the Talsh. When Balsa asked them as much, they frowned at her.

"Do you hate us, then?" the first man asked. "You're a warrior; do you want to kill us for aiding the Talsh?" He shook his head. "You can, but it won't make no difference. There's an ocean of them up at that

camp, and more keep coming. If they wanted to, they could wipe us all out before we could blink. They could steal our food and take our horses like New Yogo's army did. They could take everything, but they don't. They buy everything at generous prices. Our parents and children eat well every day and are safe."

"We're much better off than we were," the second man said. "We used to work all day in the fields for the army and the Mikado, without getting paid except with enough food to keep us working. This is much better for all of us."

"Don't insult the Mikado," the first man hissed. "The heavens are watching." Apparently, he was a believer in Yogo's god, Ten no Kami, who could strike people dead with lightning.

"Don't be silly, uncle," the second man said. "If Ten no Kami is watching, then I'm sure he understands exactly how we feel. I'm sure my old man would say the same thing." He turned toward Balsa. "Though it was hard to get food for a little while after."

"After?" Balsa asked.

"The battle, I mean. There were so many corpses that they hired help to bury them. My older brother was drafted, so I went down to the Tarano Plains to look for him after the fighting was all over.

"It was...horrible." The man shuddered. "You couldn't tell our side from their side. We buried so many, but there was no end to the corpses. I hope that whoever you're looking for isn't there."

"Were there any survivors at all?" Balsa asked. "What happened to them?"

The man snorted through his nose. "Not sure, but I heard that New Yogo's army retreated north to Yazuno from here. All the survivors who could walk went with them."

"And what about the men who couldn't walk?" Balsa asked.

The man frowned. "I heard that they put them on rafts and floated them to the southern villages. It probably would have been kinder to kill them outright. I passed through the marsh not too long ago, and it was also full of corpses. I expect they all died within a day or two of being abandoned."

Balsa felt the world around her recede. "Some of them must have survived," she breathed. "They must have. Where are the survivors?"

"Are you looking for a soldier?"

Balsa nodded. "He comes from one of the northern Yakoo villages originally."

The two men exchanged glances. "Sorry to say this, miss, but you should probably give up searching. I doubt he's alive. Even if he survived the battle and was injured, he's in the south, which is full of Talsh soldiers. If he's not in the southern villages or the fortress to the north, then he's dead."

Balsa's face fell. The young man said, "You can travel with us for a while, if you like. There's a place in the Talsh army camp where some of New Yogo's wounded are. I can lead you there."

"That's not where we're headed," the older man said.

"I'll take her on my own, uncle," the younger man said. "You can go on home with the cart. We owe her for saving us from those bandits."

The young man and the old man looked at one another for a few moments, but eventually, the old man nodded. "Take care. And come back safely," he said.

Chapter 4 - Tanda's Arm

The Talsh encampment was a well-ordered place that contained structures that looked far sturdier and stronger than most ordinary buildings in New Yogo. It was hard to believe that the Talsh army had only been camped here for a few days. The camp was ringed with storage wagons and manned by many guards who would warn the larger camp of any surprise attack. A wooden tower rose out of the center of the camp with more sentinels stationed at the top.

There were many wagons lined up outside the camp, preparing to go inside. Balsa and her escort joined this line. The wagons were stripped of their goods efficiently; the wagon owners were then paid a generous price for their goods. Another line led away from the camp to help control traffic.

When the time came for Balsa to pass, a guard thrust his spear out in front of her, blocking her path.

"Wait. You don't look like a farmer." The guard spoke Yogoese with a slight accent.

"I'm a bodyguard for someone who lives here," Balsa said. "We were attacked by bandits and separated during the journey, so I'm searching for him."

The guard nodded, then took her spear and dagger from her. "You'll have to leave these here. You can have them back when you leave the camp."

Balsa nodded, then lined up behind the other people in line to enter the camp. "Everything's so orderly," someone in line said.

There was another spearman guarding the entrance to the camp. He let Balsa and the others pass by without a second glance. Balsa picked her way through the unfamiliar camp while farmers and merchants sold their wares and collected their money. She'd never expected to have to come to a Talsh army camp, of all places, but now that she was here, she was calm. She had to stay focused to look for Tanda.

As Balsa made her way through the crowd of people selling food and supplies, she remembered something that the Talsh spy Hugo had told her.

It's true that the north is warmer than the south now, when it didn't used to be. And it's true that New Yogo has a lot of arable land that's sparsely populated. That's what the two Talsh princes are really after, I think. The Talsh are great at making a little land stretch a long way when it comes to growing food.

Of course, Rota has some good land, too, but New Yogo has more, and less of it's been developed. That makes it easy for the Talsh to turn it into whatever they want or need. But Rota's included in this plan, too. When the northern lords eventually revolt, their common people and townsfolk will move south and set up farms there. That's the idea, anyway. Having all this land conquered and used for growing could ensure peace in Talsh for generations to come. There'd be no more taxes, either.

The Talsh really were enticing the farmers to come to them. They were after New Yogo, at least in part, for its ability to produce food. Even without conquering the nation, Talsh had found a way to receive the harvest of New Yogo's farmers. The farmers didn't hate the Talsh, either, since they were being paid so well.

Chagum... Balsa honestly didn't know what Chagum would think of all this. She wondered if Chagum knew what the Talsh army was really like.

The spring sun was warm, but a shiver went up Balsa's spine as she continued her search.

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The sun was low in the west by the time Balsa decided to leave. The guard at the gate returned Balsa's spear and dagger to her. The red light of sunset illuminated the Tohata Mountains in the near distance.

Since Balsa hadn't found Tanda in the camp, the young man who'd agreed to escort her kept his word and left his uncles with their cart. He mounted Balsa's horse behind her and guided her to the place where injured Yogoese soldiers were being treated.

The horse walked slowly on the mountain paths until they reached a village at the foot of the Yauru mountain range. The people in the village hated outsiders and treated Balsa and her escort with contempt as they passed. The men returning from working in the fields glared at them suspiciously.

The young man Balsa was with raised his hand and waved. "Oh! Hey!"

"Racha?" An older man stepped out of the crowd. "I didn't expect to see you here. Who's that with you?"

Racha dismounted and walked over to the man, who was one of his uncles. He explained what he and Balsa were doing here briefly, then

gestured for Balsa to come closer. Everyone coming back from the fields gathered around Racha, curious about why he'd come, especially with a stranger.

The men frowned at Racha's explanation, but his uncle simply shrugged. "You can take her there; I don't care. It's a rotten place, though. Be careful."

"I've heard a lot of bad news lately," Balsa said. "I'm prepared. Please take me to where the injured men are."

The other men dispersed. Racha mounted the horse again. His uncle led him and Balsa farther into the village. When they reached the path that led to where the wounded were being kept, Balsa said, "You can go back now. If you're not back to your family before dark, it'll be difficult to walk in the mountains."

"No need to worry about that," Racha said. "I'll just stay with my uncle in the village."

Though it was quite dark, Racha's uncle carried no torch, nor did he suggest going back for one. They traveled for a long while before Balsa saw faint light in the distance. This place was very secluded--maybe so that the Talsh wouldn't find it.

They passed through a narrow river valley and faced a rocky cliff. There was a large, deep depression in the cliff that formed a natural cave.

Balsa smelled smoke and the sickly-sweet scent of rot.

"This is it," Racha's uncle said. "There are four caves in this cliff, all pretty close together. About two hundred injured soldiers are here. We bring food and medicine from the village and a lot of people come here

to tend them, but we still lose almost a dozen every day. We have no doctors in the village, and only one medicine man. We just don't have the resources to care for them all."

Balsa bowed to the men in thanks, then entered the nearest cave. The mouth of the cave was partially blocked by bamboo trees. The inside was roomier than she'd expected, but everything was cast in gloom. The smells of rot and smoke intensified as she walked deeper into the cave.

In the very center of the space, there was a stone pit where a large fire crackled and burned. Balsa's eyes adjusted to the low light so that she was able to make out faces. There were many straw mats on the floor near the fire, each holding a sick or injured man. Most were still, but some breathed heavily or groaned in pain.

One man was sitting up very near the fire. He looked up at Balsa, clearly afraid, though not hostile. He said nothing and didn't move as Balsa began her search for Tanda.

There were roughly thirty men in this cave, but Tanda wasn't one of them. Balsa left and went to the next cave, looking at faces one by one. None of them were familiar. She was about to enter the fourth and final cave when Racha and his uncle made their goodbyes; it was pitch dark and they had to return to the village so that their family wouldn't worry. Balsa saw regret and sadness in their faces as they left her.

Balsa entered the last cave and looked over men with blood on their faces and the rags that remained of their clothes. She gritted her teeth.

Along the right side of the cave, there was a man who was covered from head to foot by white cloth. Balsa walked closer to him and

stopped. His head shifted toward her.

Balsa's heart beat faster. She crouched down next to the man and pulled the cloth down to reveal his face. Moving the cloth sent the nauseating smell of rotting flesh directly into her nostrils; she coughed.

There was a fire in this cave just like all the others, but the light was dim here. Still, Balsa stared at the man's face and could not be mistaken.

"Tanda." He was hurt. Balsa stretched out a trembling hand and touched his face. He had a high fever and his lips were withered with dehydration. He twitched at odd intervals, but he wasn't conscious. Even when Balsa touched his face, he didn't open his eyes.

"Who are you?" There was a man behind Balsa. When Balsa turned to look, she saw that the man was very old and holding a basket of herbs.

Balsa stood up and faced the man. "My name is Balsa," she said. "This soldier is my...husband."

The old man appeared surprised. "You came all the way here from the north?"

Balsa nodded.

The old man set his basket of herbs down by the fire, then approached Balsa again. He looked down at Tanda and shook his head sadly. "He's got a day or two at most."

Balsa clenched her fists. She knew just from looking at Tanda that his wounds had taken a terrible toll.

"He was well not too long ago--well enough, anyway. He knows a lot about herbs and helped many of the men here. He managed to treat his own broken legs, but the wound on his arm was infected. Too infected." He pulled the white cloth off of Tanda's left arm, revealing a long, angry red slash that was black along the edges. Tanda's entire arm from wrist to elbow was black.

"If we cut his arm off, we might save his life," Balsa said.

"Cut off his arm? Who's strong enough for that? It's two bones, and one's very thick, and removing the arm would make him bleed a lot. The young men in the village all refused to even try, for fear that doing it would kill him outright."

Balsa stared hard at Tanda's left arm. It had touched her so many times--to treat her, to comfort her. "I'll cut it off," she said.

"What? You will?" The old man's eyes widened.

"Bring me a pot full of water and a whetsone," Balsa said. "I also need an axe, clean bandages and thick twine. I'll cut the arm off, myself, but I need other people to help me hold him still while I do it. Can the young men from the village help with that?"

The old man opened his mouth, then closed it. He nodded, then left the cave at a rapid pace.

When he was gone, Balsa crouched down next to Tanda and lifted his head into her lap. Tanda shifted a little and opened his eyes. He didn't seem to see anything at first, but his eyes slowly widened in recognition. His eyebrows drew together.

"Ba-Balsa?"

Balsa nodded. Her throat went dry; she couldn't speak. Trembling all over, she brought her face close to Tanda's. "Tanda. Can you hear me?"

Tanda blinked. He was hovering on the border between wakefulness and unconsciousness. Balsa leaned even closer and whispered in his ear, "Tanda, listen. Your left arm is infected and rotten. If I leave it, the arm will poison the rest of your body and kill you."

"Gangrene," Tanda said hoarsely.

"Yes, that's right," Balsa said. "You understand what's wrong, so you know what I have to do to save you."

Tanda's gaze wavered. His lips trembled. Balsa rested her cheek against his forehead. "I need to cut your arm off."

Tanda started to cry. He lifted his right arm with great effort and rested his palm on Balsa's back as if he were trying to comfort her. Balsa ground her teeth. She hadn't realized it until just that moment, but she was crying, too.

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The old herbalist returned to the cave with Racha. Racha came close to Balsa and whispered, "Are you really going to do it? Are you sure?"

Balsa's only answer was a nod. Racha handed her a sharpened axe and a whetstone.

"Do you have any pusam?" Balsa asked.

"Yes," he said, "but it's a laxative. I fail to see how it would be helpful here."

"Tanda regained consciousness," Balsa said. "Soaking the herb in hot water with akal makes a soup that might help him feel less pain."

"Akal is an anesthetic," the old herbalist said. "I do have that. He asked for pusam in his fever, but he could never tell me why."

"Please bring both herbs," Balsa said. "We need to make a soup and have him drink it."

The old herbalist mixed the herbs while Balsa sharpened the axe until she cut her own hands in the effort. She did the same with her dagger before washing it thoroughly and sticking it into the fire.

"Racha, help me," Balsa said. "We need him to be near the fire."

Balsa and Racha lifted the straw mat Tanda was on very gently and set it down close to the fire. Balsa removed his shirt and set it aside, exposing the blackened arm. She removed the scabbard of her short spear, revealing a long length of strong twine that she sometimes used for emergency repairs. She tied the twine painfully tight above Tanda's elbow, creating a tourniquet to prevent excessive bleeding.

The old herbalist finished making Tanda's medicine. Balsa washed the axe carefully, then placed it in the fire next to her knife. She helped Tanda swallow the medicine, then said, "Hold him down tight. If he moves during this, I might hurt him more."

Balsa removed the axe from the fire. While Racha and the herbalist held Tanda still, Balsa made a practice cut in the air just over Tanda's elbow, then brought the blade of the axe down strongly through Tanda's arm.

When it was all over, Racha left the cave and threw up. The old herbalist followed him outside, wiping cold sweat from his forehead.

"I've never met a woman like *that* before..."

Balsa had cut off Tanda's arm without a scrap of hesitation. The moment the arm was off, she'd tied another length of twine above Tanda's elbow. The hot axe had completely cauterized the wound, which didn't bleed as much as the herbalist had expected. She was more skilled at treating battle wounds than anyone he'd ever seen

before. He hoped that her steady hand and unflinching resolve would be enough to save Tanda's life.

Part 3: Heaven and Earth

Chapter 1 - Voices of the Earth and Sky

Torogai rustled through the tall grass. Several people carrying torches tamped down the grass, making a place for her to sit. They dipped skewered bird meat in oil and roasted it over a fire for dinner.

The moon was out, but the sky was overcast; wind blew clouds over the moon and hid it from view. Torogai sat down on the flattened grass and drank wine with dinner.

"Fill my cup again," Torogai said.

A woman filled a wooden cup with a sweet-smelling alcoholic beverage. Torogai quaffed the contents of her cup in a single gulp, then heaved a contented sigh.

"It's about time for the hosam flowers to start blooming, but it's been so cold," Torogai muttered. "A lot of the snow hasn't even melted yet. That should happen any day now..."

A slightly built older man sat next to Torogai, eating from his skewer. He put a spiced miso powder called jiki on a yui leaf and crushed it before eating.

"You should eat before you start drinking," the man said. "We'll talk after we've all finished our meal."

Torogai's eyebrows rose. She appeared offended. "Are you so concerned for the health of Oromugai and Kashugai, young whippersnapper?"

"I'm not concerned for anyone's health, but knowledge," he said. "You're the best and strongest magic weaver out of all of us."

"Maybe if you had a few, you'd be more agreeable," Torogai muttered, waving her cup.

"Agreeable?" the man snorted. "Are you flirting with me?"

"And if I was?" Her eyebrows waggled.

All the people sitting around the fire laughed, including Torogai. All of them were magic weavers. Some were pure Yakoo, others pure Yogoese, but most of them were mixed race. They had all apprenticed under masters for many years to hone their craft and develop their specialized knowledge.

After polishing off their skewers, the magic weavers ate steamed rice and a soup whose stock was made with bird bones. As they finished eating, they started discussing the state of things in the Misty Blue Mountains along the line of the Blue Bow River.

"The mountains of Cha Kochi in the west are still buried in snow, even at this time of year," Gashugai said, licking oil from the skewers off her fingers. "The only reason the river hasn't flooded the banks is because everything's still frozen."

"The situation in the east on Oh Kochi is the same. The Turtle River is fortified against floods, but I don't think the retaining walls are going to be strong enough this year."

Oromugai leaned forward. "Seems like the time is coming soon. The source of the extra water is in Sahnan, the water source for our continent. There will be flooding everywhere. The capital will probably be washed completely away."

Torogai rubbed her chin. "Spirits are pairing up in the Yusa Mountains to the north. The Mountain King will take a new mate.

Kanbal is also affected by the changing of the season. I expect their lands will flood, too."

"Is that true?" Gashugai looked appalled.

"Yes. I've heard it from several Kanbalese people who were trapped here when the borders closed."

"I heard something from my master," Oromugai said hoarsely. "Apparently, there was a terrible earthquake many hundreds of years ago that changed the entire shape of the land, even the way the rivers flow. Rivers and lakes overflowed and flooded the land. Spirits from Nayugu migrated away from the disaster in such numbers that they formed a rainbow across the sky."

The spirits in the Yusa Mountains spilled forth and became a rainbow. My master said that the spirits pairing off brings forth new spirits from the earth, causing it to cry out as new spirits are born."

"Well, that's inconvenient. They certainly cause a lot of damage to the earth in being born," a middle-aged magic weaver said.

The assembled magic weavers exchanged weak smiles.

The Yusa Mountains and Misty Blue Mountains were right next to one another. It was spring in Nayugu, making temperatures warmer, so the water that was usually bound up in the mountain peaks would melt and run down the mountains, increasing the water level in Nayugu even further. It seemed obvious to everyone that the entire country would flood—especially the lowlands like Kosenkyo and the farming villages that bordered the Blue Bow River and its tributaries.

One of the oldest magic weavers, who was sitting farther from the fire than the others, frowned darkly. "We'll get runoff from both

mountain ranges here. We need to tell everyone to get to high ground as soon as possible, or many lives will be lost."

"Even if we tell them, they won't go," the middle-aged magic weaver said. "They're all busy in the fields at the moment. And besides, there might not be enough room for everyone to get to high ground, anyway. We also don't know exactly when the flood will begin."

"The source of this problem is in Nayugu," Orumugai said. "The Mountain King is taking a mate. So we should see the flood in Nayugu before we see it here."

Torogai rested her hands on her knees. "Tanda told me something interesting. There are people who are born with he ability to see both Nayugu and Sagu simultaneously, and at will. He suggested using them as o chal—early warning signals for those of us who can't see it.

Orumugai and the other magic weavers nodded. "As expected of your apprentice," Orumugai said. "And while we can't see Nayugu naturally, our abilities do allow us to assess the situation there. We can sound the alarm when we notice disturbances that indicate the flood is near."

"I know someone like that," Gashugai said. "Someone who can see Nayugu, I mean."

The other magic weavers nodded. They, too, knew at least one other person capable of seeing Nayugu.

"It will be difficult to warn everyone when the snow is already melting on the mountains," Torogai said. "We need to prepare places for people to evacuate to. There won't be time for them to run far from their villages when the flood is already upon us. And we'll send birds of

light as messengers, projecting our souls to spread the word quickly when the flood is finally here."

Orumugai frowned. "Creating birds of light isn't a simple trick. "There are seven of us, including your apprentice, who can do it—and we'd have to warn twenty-seven villages, spaced far apart. It's impossible."

"And what about the people in the capital?" Gashigai asked.

Torogai smiled. "Leave the capital to me. I have it taken care of. The villages are the main concern now."

"What do you mean?" the middle-aged magic weaver asked. "The people in the capital won't listen to magic weavers. They have no trust in us, especially the people in the Middle Fan and the Upper Fan who are wealthy and noble. They believe we are evil and untrustworthy."

"If they're determined to be stubborn, they won't be saved," Torogai said. "All we can do is warn them."

Orumugai looked like he wanted to make an objection, but Torogai cut him off with a wave of her hand. "Listen," she said. "The moment the o chal see signs of flooding, we must all send out birds of light as messengers to the villages. I will serve as the Master of the Misty Blue Mountains, Oh Roku Ohm."

The other magic weavers were dumbstruck.

"Master Torogai, do you intend to use the Thread of the Golden Spider?" Orumugai asked.

Torogai chuckled, but Oromugai and the other magic weavers appeared afraid.

"Only Norugai, your master, was able to use that technique successfully," Orumugai said. "If it should fail…"

Torogai nodded. "I learned how to do it from Norugai long ago, when I was forty and she was seventy. She once used it to warn a village of a terrible earthquake. She used the Thread of the Golden Spider—Sho Yai—to project her soul and warn everyone. There are few of us now, but by using the Thread of the Golden Spider, we should be able to warn everyone in time." Torogai seemed to be looking at something very far away. "It is very powerful, but also very dangerous. My master only passed its secret on to me just before her death."

There was a long silence. Torogai looked around at the magic weavers and said, "Why such grim faces? It isn't as if being a magic weaver is easy at the best of times. We are, all of us, walking along the line of a very thin thread that could snap at any time. If you're afraid of reaching for new knowledge or using new and powerful techniques, then you should give up magic weaving for something simpler."

Torogai cackled. "If I live through this, buy me a huge jar of wine. Yeah?" She shrugged. "And if I die, make sure my exploits are told in song and story. I have no desire to be forgotten."

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Shuga felt warm wind against his face. He looked up at the surface of a mountain and saw muddy water falling in sheets from its summit,

toppling trees and flowing rapidly toward the ground below. The flood triggered a landslide that crumbled the entire mountainside.

Shuga covered his face with his arm. There was no place to run. The trees surrounding him were uprooted, carried away with the waves —

He waited to be swept away in the landslide, but it didn't happen. Shuga opened his eyes cautiously. He was surrounded by swirling, milk-colored fog. There was no sign that a landslide had taken place recently. There was only the fog, and the smell of some fragrant tree burning nearby.

Shuga sneezed. The mist before him gathered around a single point, then started unwinding like a spool of thread directly in front of him until he could no longer see the place where it was thinnest in the gloom.

There was a dim figure before him, indistinct. There was no one there, but he felt the presence of a soul. He also heard someone speaking, but he was too far away to identify any words.

The hazy figure in front of Shuga grew larger and started taking on definition. Shuga blinked in surprise when he recognized the figure. "Torogai!" It was her voice that he'd been hearing, but it had been far away; he had heard it as an echo from a mountain valley.

"That wasn't a dream," Torogai said. "It may have felt like one, but it wasn't."

Shuga frowned. "I saw a landslide," he said.

"The water in the rivers will overflow and cause a flood," Torogai said. Shuga could hear her voice, but it was faint. "It will happen in less than twenty days."

Torogai's voice became weaker, quieter. Shuga realized that the connection between their spirits was fraying because he wasn't yet skilled at this kind of magic weaving. He didn't know how to strengthen or maintain the connection.

"Wait!" Shuga said. "Within twenty days, you said? How will we know when it's coming?"

"You will feel a thread," Torogai whispered. "A golden thread attached to your soul. You are my apprentice. You will hear the voice of the earth."

The edges of Torogai's image blurred. Her spirit was like a white light. Just before she vanished, she said, "You are a Star Reader. Warn the people using the voice of your God of the Heavens."

Shuga sat up in bed. He'd broken into a cold sweat and had a headache. He understood that what he'd just seen was not an ordinary dream. He'd smelled a fragrant tree in flames and seen a landslide, followed by a flood. The fragrant tree was used to connect souls together over long distances; Torogai had taught Shuga how to do this. The visions he'd seen must have come from her.

A disaster was coming. The season was too warm and all the runoff from the mountains was making the rivers and lakes swell with water--too much water. The capital would flood. There would be a disaster.

Twenty days.

Shuga stared into the darkness of his room with an expression of horror. He wished that all of this was a nightmare, but it wasn't. He had to do something.

Shuga got up and started getting his star charts and portent readings in order. His hands shook the entire time. The Imperial Palace and the Star Palace both bordered the Blue Bow River. If the flood was as serious as it appeared, both places would be completely washed away. There were drainage ditches and dikes to provide flood control, of course, but Shuga knew that these wouldn't be enough.

New Yogo didn't have to wait for Talsh to come and destroy it. A disaster of this scale would do a fine job of that all on its own.

Why did Kainan Nanai even decide to come here? Why leave the southern continent, built Kosenkyo and the Star Palace, and found a new nation? Did he not foresee this?

The Blue Bow River had never had a serious flooding problem historically, but now, it was all Shuga could think about. Building Kosenkyo's capital so close to two rivers that could flood at any time was a risk. Kainan Nanai was a wise man, so he must have had his reasons. The official explanation was that Kosenkyo was built in a gap in the mountains, where the stars could be easily read and Tendo could be practiced. Was that the truth? Or were there other reasons?

Shuga pushed off his shilya bedding and stood up. He got dressed and opened a small box close to his pillow. There was a key inside. Shuga took the key and went out into the dark hallway of the Star Palace.

There was no one else in the hallway at this hour. Candles flickered in their holders, providing dim illumination.

Shuga stopped outside the Holy Sage's room, then entered through the enormous door that led to Hibi Tonan's inner sanctum. Shuga still thought of it as his, even though he had died some time ago. The room was eerily empty. Shuga shivered, feet cold from the stone floor, and looked up at the raised dais where the Holy Sage used to sit.

The enormity of the space dwarfed him. Shuga took a deep breath, then picked up one of the lit candles lined up along one wall. The candles were meant to ward away evil. He pushed a tapestry hanging on the wall to the side, revealing a locked door. Shuga unlocked the door with his key and went inside.

This room had first belonged to Kainan Nanai. His diaries and records were stored there and kept secret from all the other Star Readers, save for the Holy Sage. The oldest records were on stone tablets written in an archaic register of Old Yogoese.

It had been five years since the Holy Sage had first given Shuga the key to this room. He'd been so busy with Crown Prince Chagum's education that he hadn't been able to visit it too often, but Crown Prince Chagum had been away from the Imperial Palace for a very long time. Shuga sat down at Kainan Nanai's desk and started reading through some of the records he'd left behind.

He was trying to figure out why Kainan Nanai had chosen to build the capital where it was. He set many stone tablets on the floor and started to read in the dim light of his candle. The room and the floor were both cold, but he barely noticed.

Shuga narrowed his eyes at what he read. The tablet gave Kainan Nanai's reasoning for recruiting and teaching young Star Readers in Kosenkyo.

The young must be taught and encouraged in their gifts so that we always have an understanding of what the heavens are trying to communicate. The practice of Star Reading is meant to defend our nation from disasters and provide advance warning before they occur. If Star Reading is not consistently practiced, our capital and our nation will be destroyed.

Shuga felt goosebumps rise on his skin. His fingers rested in the carved stone letters as he held his breath, staying completely still.

Kainan Nanai was a complicated man. He had accomplished much for New Yogo, but he'd also concealed many important secrets for his own inscrutable reasons. What Shuga felt more than anything else was betrayal. Kainan Nanai had betrayed future Star Readers by not sharing his secrets and philosophy with them. It was like trying to navigate while blind.

If Star Reading is not consistently practiced, our capital and our nation will be destroyed.

Kainan Nanai had known that something like this would happen, but the Star Readers had forgotten over the generations--or they'd never been told. All the portents in the heavens lately pertained to the Talsh invasion, especially the Portent of Great Change, which indicated that the old would give way to the new--likely in a violent way.

Shuga had assumed that the portent was related to the Talsh, but it was possible that it was a warning about the flood as well. If that was

the case, none of the other Star Readers knew. Shuga was the only one with forewarning of the flood.

Shuga blew out his candle and left Kainan Nanai's secret room. Dawn was still a long way off, but Shuga wasn't the least bit tired. He climbed the steps of the Star Palace to the viewing platform atop the tower. The Star Readers and guards on duty had blankets over their shoulders and were huddled near the torches and watchfires. Some of them were more than half-asleep.

Shuga remembered falling asleep here during late shifts all the time when he was a boy. Shuga rested his hand on the guardrail and looked silently up at the sky, careful not to wake any of the sleepers.

The sky was partly cloudy, but Shuga could see many stars clearly.

The young must be taught and encouraged in their gifts so that we always have an understanding of what the heavens are trying to communicate.

Star Reading had been continuously practiced for two hundred years, but there was so much they didn't know and hadn't been told. Shuga and the other young Star Readers had a poor foundation to learn from. Kainan Nanai had used his knowledge of the heavens and the future to guide the Mikado and the nation. He was considered uncommonly wise by most people, but Shuga was starting to revise his opinion.

Shuga looked up at the Portent of Great Change and sighed. The city might be swept away in a landslide or a flood, but it was still the beginning of spring. Flowers were blooming and trees were starting to fruit. Life went on. It might be too late to save the capital, but that didn't

mean there was nothing Shuga could do. Kainan Nanai himself had relocated in a time of danger.

Shuga heard a sound behind him and turned. The Star Reader who had fallen asleep was awake. He stammered an apology to Shuga and started looking at portents again,

"I want to open a formal conference for all the Star Readers tomorrow morning," he said. "I've made a discovery, and we have much to discuss."

Chapter 2 - Ancient Roots

Sunlight from high windows fell upon Shuga's star map. Shuga lifted his eyes from the map when he heard a knock at the door.

"Karyou, Lieutenant of the Mikado's armies, has come to see you," a messenger said.

"Let him in," Shuga said.

A boy opened the door, letting Karyou pass through. He was a very tall man with a commanding presence. Karyou said nothing until the boy left the room and closed the door.

Karyou approached Shuga, getting a little too close for comfort. He looked over Shuga's shoulder at his star map.

"That portent you told me of has proved helpful," Karyou said. "General Radou doesn't like moving the army around without consulting the Star Readers on the current state of the heavens first."

Shuga nodded. "There isn't much time left. It makes sense that he'd want a complete understanding of the portents."

Karyou smiled a little. "It's quiet as an execution ground, both here and in the palace. We're going to get a real understanding of what we're up against soon. The nobles are all on edge."

Karyou had thrown all the surviving soldiers who had informed him of New Yogo's crushing defeat in the first battle into the palace dungeon. The imperial army of New Yogo was never allowed to lose. Karyou said that the soldiers who had reported the defeat had defected to the side of the enemy.

"And how is the Mikado?" Shuga asked mildly.

"As he always is, as placid as a mountain lake. The news from the battlefield made him more calm, not less."

Shuga looked out the window at the spring sunlight.

"The Talsh took a fortress near Shirogai seven days ago," Karyou said. "It's called Akato. All of the defenders were killed. The Talsh lost a few hundred men."

Shuga's eyes widened.

"The Talsh army marching toward us numbers something like twenty thousand men. We expected them to disregard the fortresses and come right for us, and that's what they're doing. Yazuno Fortress will soon be under attack. We're pulling everyone back to defend the capital."

Shuga shook his head a little. Karyou's strategy would allow the Talsh to approach Kosenkyo's gates without encountering anything more than token resistance. Shuga wondered how Karyou had felt when he'd heard about the men lying dead on the Tarano Plains. Had he felt anything at all? There was no trace of emotion anywhere on his face.

"Does anyone else know that the Talsh are approaching from the east?" Shuga asked.

Karyou shook his head. "No, no one else knows." He snorted. "Our army was always at a disadvantage, and not only because the disparity in numbers. The Talsh are better at gathering information than we are. They also have better tactics that allow them to kill more of our men while protecting their own. I don't want to leak any more information

to the Talsh than we have to, but I don't know what to do. Their spies are everywhere."

Karyou scratched his beard. "But, well, things are progressing like we thought. We've lost some men in the fortresses, but not too many."

After all, it was a blessing that the Talsh were avoiding New Yogo's fortifications along the road. The men stationed there weren't in immediate danger from the Talsh army.

Yazuno Fortress could likely be taken with fewer than ten thousand men. Yazuno was the closest fortress to New Yogo, so after it fell, Kosenkyo would be essentially undefended. There were only seven thousand men set aside specifically for Kosenkyo's defense.

If the Talsh made it into the city, Karyou planned to poison the Mikado and use the grief and shock of the nobles and the people of the city to force a surrender. He had already communicated this plan to two Talsh generals who were marching toward Kosenkyo. They had agreed not to burn the city if Karyou went ahead with his plan.

"We have armies marching on us from the east and the west," Shuga said. "I know the eastern army will get here first, but when will the western army arrive?"

"We're not certain yet, but it should be sometime within the next three days."

Shuga nodded. "Please take care of the Mikado before he Talsh arrive."

"What?" Karyou seemed shocked. "I never expected to hear that from you, of all people. Why the sudden change of heart?"

"An unprecedented disaster will soon strike our land," Shuga said.

"Am unprecedented disaster? What are you talking about?"

"We've had an uncommonly warm year," Shuga said. "When the snow melts on the Misty Blue Mountains, our rivers will overflow. We've already had a lot of storms and landslides this year, and it's only going to get worse."

It was a relief for Shuga to finally tell someone what he was worried about in plain terms.

Karyou went pale. "Is that true?"

Shuga nodded. "I had some Star Readers go out to investigate the water levels of the nearby streams and rivers this morning. They confirmed all my suspicions in their reports. The water level is already too high. We're at risk for a flood in the capital sometime within the next few weeks." Shuga paused, gauging Karyou's reaction. "We need to start evacuating people from the city now, while we still can."

"Where can we possibly evacuate so many people?"

"We have to at least evacuate the capital and get the people living in the southern villages to higher ground," Shuga said. "The Bird Shadow Hills should be high enough. We can start setting up camps there and the Moon Plains."

"Camps?" Karyou asked. "I know we have to do something, but we can't spare the manpower for an evacuation, or to set up camp outside the city. We also can't abandon the capital with the Talsh army on our doorstep. What would our people think?"

"It doesn't matter," Shuga said. "The capital is going to be destroyed, one way or another."

Karyou frowned. "The flood is only the first problem we have to solve. Flooding on that scale means that people will lose their homes. We'll lose food to spoilage. You're talking about a disaster on a nation-wide scale--and people might not even believe us when we tell them it's coming."

Shuga nodded. "It's like I said. There is a Portent of Great Disaster in the heavens. People can choose to flee and leave their homes behind, or lose their lives."

Understanding dawned in Karyou's eyes. He knew why Shuga had asked him to deal with the Mikado before the Talsh army arrived. It would be impossible to start the evacuations with the Mikado in charge. The Portent of Great Disaster would be interpreted as a disaster for the Talsh, not New Yogo. Shuga's warning that the capital would be destroyed would likely be ignored. And Gakai, who had become the new Holy Sage, would go along with whatever the Mikado said without question.

"If we announce the Portent of Great Disaster at the Mikado's funeral, people will believe it," Shuga said. "Their spiritual leader and god will be dead. The Mikado can't even claim to be able to protect them if he's gone."

Karyou looked nervous, but he nodded. "I guess I'll have to move my plans up. The Mikado will be performing a ritual to purify the battlefield of the Tarano Plains tomorrow morning. After that, he'll go into seclusion with the Holy Sage. I can arrange for the poison to be administered then." The poison couldn't be one that worked immediately. Otherwise, the poison (and perhaps the poisoner) would be detected. The Mikado also had taste-testers who would certainly die

if the Mikado did. It would be obvious to everyone in the palace that the Mikado had been assassinated.

The Mikado's ceremony was a very serious one. After it was over, he would seclude himself with the Holy Sage for three days. During that time, the Mikado would not eat or drink anything at all. Karyou had planned to poison him at his first meal after the fast, when he would be at his weakest.

"We need to be prepared to throw away our foundation. Everything we ever believed in. Our ancient roots. If we don't, our nation will not survive."

Karyou and Shuga planned to kill the Mikado and hand the country over to the Talsh. If either of them had any hesitation, they showed no sign of it. All Shuga could think of now was how to limit the damage of the coming flood as much as possible.

Chapter 3 - The Return

It was a quiet morning in the imperial palace. The nobles and imperial family donned white garb and went to purify themselves and pray. Chagum's mother, the Second Queen, was absent from the proceedings. She had retired to the mountain villa in grief after learning that her son was dead. She did not see people much anymore, and the Mikado had not gone to the mountain villa even once to comfort her.

After the Holy Sage had died, Shuga and Ozuru were made apprentices to Gakai, who had been selected as the new Holy Sage. They attended the ceremony as well in their capacity as Gakai's apprentices. Gakai delegated most of the work for preparing the ceremony to Shuga. Though Gakai and Shuga had served Hibi Tonan as equals for many years, Shuga hadn't seen Gakai face to face in months. Gakai was usually in his own chambers or in consultation with the Mikado.

Crown Prince Tugum had just turned five, so it wasn't easy for him to sit still during the ceremony for very long. He fell sound asleep within a few hours. his grandfather Radou held him in his lap as he slept, looking around at the uneasy faces of the court nobles who were gathered for the ceremony.

New Yogo continued to suffer heavy losses. Akato Fortress was completely destroyed. If Yazuno Fortress fell, the Talsh would be able to march to Kosenkyo's gates unopposed. Everyone feared that the Talsh would soon arrive and burn the city. They would probably kill the Mikado, the imperial family and New Yogo's court nobles. Radou saw many pinched expressions and sunken eyes. No one could sleep when their imminent deaths were staring them in the eye. The court nobles

faced the altar for the ceremony with poorly concealed terror on their faces.

The people of New Yogo had only one hope left, and that was that Ten no Kami would intervene on their behalf, sending lightning and storms to destroy their enemies and save them.

The sound of an ethereal flute echoed through the courtyard where the ceremony was being held. This flute announced the Mikado's arrival. The court nobles bowed their heads deeply and brought their palms to the floor.

The bright white of the Mikado's clothing contrasted with his dark, glossy hair, making him appear indescribably pure. He walked slowly along a white aisle runner up to the altar with perfect posture, not a hair out of place. He looked more like a carved marble statue than a man.

The Mikado faced the rising sun in the east and extended his hands to it. The court nobles watched him with expressions of reverence as he began a prayer chant asking the heavens for victory in war. Bright light illuminated the Mikado's face. His clear voice echoed to the farthest reaches of the courtyard.

Shuga stared directly at the Mikado during the ceremony and did not bow his head. This was a show of utter disrespect.

Even though the war was going badly and the country was as good as lost, the Mikado never stopped believing in his own divinity. He had never even doubted it. He considered all of his own actions divine, regardless of the consequences.

Shuga suddenly felt the strangeness and the enormity of the change in attitude he'd suffered over the course of his career. If he believed in the Mikado again, would the Mikado truly be able to work miracles? Maybe if he'd started his life knowing that the Mikado wasn't infallible, he could have prevented the country from being invaded and destroyed.

Shuga had no doubt that what he was planning now was the right thing, but he was still worried.

The Mikado continued to chant his prayer in a measured, unchanging rhythm. Clouds covered the sun. The Mikado remained rooted to the spot in front of the altar, like a white tree. The nation of New Yogo had been founded more than two hundred years before. The Mikado was the foundation of New Yogo's government. Assassinating him would rock New Yogo to its very foundations. It might never recover. It would certainly never be what it once was.

But perhaps that was for the best. What it once was had led directly to its destruction.

The wind picked up and the cloud cover overhead completely blotted out the sun. The trees in the courtyard swayed in the wind under a lead-gray sky. The Mikado took an evergreen tree branch in hand and sprinkled sacred water at the four corners of the altar. Birds chirped in the trees nearby.

Suddenly, a rider came over the bridge leading over the moat in front of the imperial palace. There was a deafening din like a sea roar as people reacted to the rider's arrival.

Only the Mikado remained completely unreactive. He continued with the ceremony as if nothing was going on. He burned the branch he

held, sending perfumed smoke into the sky. The Mikado wrote a message in fire in the air to Ten no Kami, the God of the Heavens. As smoke from the branch rose, the cloud cover overhead dissipated, revealing the sun again.

The ceremony was over.

The Mikado left the courtyard, followed by the assembled court nobles. They gathered in a wide hall where offerings for Ten no Kami were brought in. After the offerings were made, a banquet began. Karyou would ask the Mikado to seclude himself with the Holy Sage during the banquet. The Mikado would almost certainly agree to his request.

Shuga climbed the plain wooden steps to a platform where he took his seat behind the Mikado and the Holy Sage. There would be no backing out of the assassination plan after tonight.

The Mikado and the court nobles all took their seats for the banquet. The doors of the banquet hall opened. The Mikado's chamberlain suddenly rushed in, red-faced and out of breath. He bowed low before the Mikado, then approached his chair and whispered something in his ear.

The Mikado was clearly displeased by what he'd heard. It was the first time he'd ever displayed emotion so openly in front of other people. He looked down for a few moments to compose himself, eyes staring into space as if there was something there that only he could see. When he looked up, he cleared his throat and said, "I have received joyous news. Our enemies have suffered a crushing defeat at Yazuno Fortress."

The nobles in the banquet hall whispered and tittered. Some broke out into actual cheers.

"The one who assured our victory at Yazuno Fortress was my son, Chagum," the Mikado said. "He is riding with the combined armies of Kanbal and Rota to Kosenkyo."

The people who were cheering suddenly stopped, mouths hanging open. Silence fell as everyone processed this news.

Shuga was no less stunned than anyone else. Crown Prince Chagum... He tried to focus on the banquet hall and the task at hand, but he couldn't. He could think of nothing else but Chagum's brave act in preserving Yazuno Fortress. And he was coming home. The world around him receded as if he were walking in a dream.

Was this a dream? Or would he wake and find the world as it was before?

Crown Prince Chagum is alive. He's coming back. And with the armies of Kanbal and Rota!

"Unbelievable," Ozoru muttered next to Shuga. "How does something like that even happen?"

Ozoru's voice restored Shuga to where he was. His body felt light and warm, like it was being suspended in bubbling water. For the first time in years, Shuga was genuinely happy. He brought his hand in front of his face and choked back tears. He never thought he would see Crown Prince Chagum again. *What is he like now? He's completely grown up.*

While nobles in the room cheered, Shuga cast his eyes down and prayed. *Ten no Kami, thank you.* When he looked up again, the mood of

the room had completely changed. General Radou was standing in front of the Mikado's raised dais, arms akimbo and face red with rage. The Third Queen looked pale. Nobles and officials who had opposed Chagum's policies within the imperial court exchanged uneasy glances and spoke to one another in tense whispers. Of all the residents of the Third Palace, only Princess Mishuna seemed glad to hear that Chagum was alive.

Mishuna caught Shuga's eye and grinned hugely. Shuga smiled back, encouraged by her show of goodwill. He still felt warm and as light as air.

"Silence," the Mikado commanded.

The court nobles snapped their mouths shut.

"This is recent news that came in on the fastest horse available," the Mikado said. "Much about the situation is still unclear. Refrain from sharing this information and speculating until more reports come in. Karyou."

Karyou looked up, startled.

The Mikado looked Karyou in the eyes and said, "Ride out to the western gate and report back on all who approach. We need to be sure that this new report is not some kind of trick by the enemy."

"At once, Your Imperial Majesty." Karyou bowed his head, then left the banquet hall.

The Mikado faced his chamberlain. "If Chagum truly is alive and has returned, he must be welcomed. Go to greet him and verify that he is who he says he is. Go and make preparations to receive him now."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty." Karyou bowed his head.

The Mikado shifted his gaze from Karyou to his chamberlain. "If it is true that Chagum has indeed returned to us, preparations must be made here as well. See to it."

Shuga caught Karyou's eye while the Mikado was speaking. There was pain in Karyou's eyes, poorly concealed. They were now in a very complicated position. Chagum's reappearance now changed everything. Karyou had good reason to believe that Shuga would back Chagum and recuse himself from their previous plans. He might even report Karyou's activities to the Mikado.

Shuga guessed that Karyou's main objective now would be to keep Shuga from leaking information and plans to anyone else.

Shuga would support Chagum, of course, but he had no intention of revealing Karyou's plans to anyone. Why would he? He hadn't told anyone else so far. He looked from Karyou to the Mikado.

Ordinarily, a father would rejoice at hearing their child was back from the dead and returning home, but there was no joy on the Mikado's face, only a cold, indifferent mask. Shuga kept his eyes cast down and took only surreptitious glances, but inside, he was seething.

Shuga and Karyou had lost their chance to assassinate the Mikado. Chagum's return meant that the Mikado wouldn't go into seclusion with the Holy Sage after the banquet.

If only he'd arrived just a little later...

If would have been better for Chagum to return to court after the Mikado was dead. Shuga had no idea how the Mikado intended to treat Chagum now that he was here. And Chagum had suffered two unsuccessful assassination attempts, both ordered by his father.

Shuga was nervous about how it would all unfold. He started at the ground near the Mikado's feet with the nobles whispering all around him and worried.

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The people of Kosenkyo thought they were walking in a dream when sunset came.

The failing light made the shiny roof tiles in the capital shine a bright gold. Yogoese soldiers in brightly polished armor rode beside the dirty and blood-spattered soldiers of foreign armies from Kanbal and Rota. They marched down First Street, which led directly from Yazuno Fortress to the Imperial Palace.

Toya was outside his Anything Store when the armies started passing by. He called out, "Oi! Saya! You have to come see this!"

Hearing her husband calling, Saya poked her head outside the door. Their young son hung from a sling on her back, sound asleep. Saya shifted him a little and pointed. "Look at all those brave warriors! How fine they look!"

A cheer went up somewhere along the line that was repeated through the crowd. "It's Rota's spearmen! They're coming through! The Rotan army has come to save us!" The cheer was started by Rotan citizens who had been trapped in New Yogo since the borders had closed.

The Yogoese people observing the armies were stunned by how many men rode through the city. The street became crowded as

Yogoese, Kanbalese and Rotan people pressed together to watch the armies pass through. Many of the people gathered there had been making preparations to flee their homes in case the capital was invaded and burned by the Talsh, but now, a huge new army had come to defend them. It seemed like a miracle.

People cheered with relieved tears streaming down their faces. The armies kept riding toward the Upper Fan and the Imperial Palace on First Street until they were lost from view.

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The Imperial Palace was surrounded by a high white plaster wall that looked burnished in the light of the setting sun. The wall separated the Upper Fan from the Imperial Palace Complex. The only access point between the two was the large South Gate. A wide moat had been dug in front of the wall recently to make passage more difficult.

The combined Kanbalese and Rotan army rode up to the South Gate. They had been through many battles and suffered casualties, but roughly seventeen thousand men were still well and strong enough to fight.

The bridge over the moat was down and the South Gate was open, allowing the combined army to pass into the Imperial Palace Complex on a smooth path of crushed white stone. The imperial family was near the gate, with courtiers and lesser nobles lined up behind them.

The nobles all stiffened in shock when they saw Chagum. He was almost unrecognizable. When he'd left the Imperial Palace last time, he

had still looked like a boy and had comported himself with the grace and purity expected of a future Mikado.

Chagum now was entirely different. He stopped his horse in front of the gate, wearing a full suit of Kanbalese armor. Something about his aura was threatening, like he'd killed people before, and there was a hard glint in his eyes.

Chagum settled his helmet at his side, steering his horse one-handed. There was a long scar extending from below his right eye all the way down his cheek. A bloody bandage was wrapped around his neck and shoulder.

As Chagum passed through the gate, his Rotan and Kanbalese guards dismounted. A young man rushed forward to help Chagum off his horse. The guards seemed concerned about Chagum's injuries, but he paid them no mind. He stood on the crushed stone of the path and looked around.

"Chagum..." The Second Queen called out to him from the crowd. She'd come back from the mountain villa the moment she'd heard that Chagum had returned.

Chagum's detached expression completely changed when he saw the Second Queen. "Mother..."

He walked closer to the place where his mother was sitting. He knelt down in front of her and took her hand. "I've finally come back," he said. "I must have worried you terribly. Please forgive me."

The Second Queen wept openly, gripping her son's hands tightly and nodding over and over again. Her hands were shaking. Chagum squeezed her hands and tried to comfort her.

The Second Queen composed herself and stopped trembling. She smiled. Chagum stood up, letting her hands go.

Princess Mishuna was standing in front of him, grinning from ear to ear. One by one, the nobles of the imperial court approached to greet him. The chamberlain rushed up, cheeks red from running, accompanied by a young man that Chagum recognized as his body servant, Ruin.

The last one to greet Chagum was Shuga. He forgot to avert his eyes and started avidly at Chagum, who he hadn't seen in so many years.

Chagum was sunburned. The uneven scar on his face shone in the sunlight. He appeared to be much older than his seventeen years. The long journey and battles had hardened the boy he used to be.

"I came back alive," Chagum said with a bright smile.

Shuga swallowed heavily and fought back tears. He wanted to say something, but when he opened his mouth, no sound came out.

Chagum had returned.

Chapter 4 - Two Children of a God

The chamberlain approached Chagum and bowed, asking if he would like to bathe and rest after his long journey.

Chagum cut off the chamberlain's words with a gesture. "I don't have time for that," he said. "Lead me to the audience hall immediately. I must speak with my father at once."

Chagum headed to the Mikado's audience hall with all the court nobles and the chamberlain trailing behind him. His guards flanked him on either side.

The Mikado's private audience hall was in the southernmost part of the Imperial Palace. No one but the imperial family and their guards were allowed there unless they were summoned. Chagum himself had never been there before.

The nobles following Chagum were openly curious about what he intended. They trailed him all the way into the palace and took their seats on cushions lined up along the wall of the audience hall.

Chagum stalked up the runner of the audience hall, accompanied by his guards. The Mikado's gem-inlaid throne was at the end of it, up two raised steps.

Grand Army General Radou gazed at Chagum from his seat with a disapproving expression. Crown Prince Tugum was seated in a smaller throne one level below the Mikado's throne. Tugum was his grandson, and he had assumed that Tugum would be the next Mikado for some years. Chagum's return might cause a succession issue. Chagum didn't look at Radou even once.

Shuga sat in a chair one level below the Holy Sage's and stared at Chagum, who stood in the very center of the hall.

The sound of high-pitched flutes announced the Mikado's arrival in the hall. He came through the wide doors of the hall, accompanied by his bodyguards. They stood near the Mikado's throne on either side to protect him from danger.

Gakai followed the Mikado into the hall and assumed the seat of the Holy Sage easily and fluidly.

The Mikado took his seat, glaring down at Chagum with an expression of venomous hatred. Chagum knelt down and bowed his head briefly, then looked up and said, "I've returned, father."

The Mikado frowned at him. "You did well to come back. What is the meaning of your scandalous appearance? Is this how you come to greet your father?"

Chagum stood up. "The situation we face is urgent and dangerous. Forgive me for putting our nation's crisis ahead of repairing my own appearance."

"Nothing is so urgent that you could not at least wash the blood from your face and clothes. You are polluting this holy, purified place with your filth."

Chagum sighed in exasperation. "Father, I understand that I don't belong here. I have been on battlefields and killed and taken wounds. Perhaps these these things have corrupted me. But father, the world outside the walls of this place is thick with the smell of blood and death. Maybe no one here has smelled it yet, but all of the common people have. I never want this place to be corrupted in the same way, but to save it, we must use haste."

Chagum flung his right hand out with his palm to the Mikado. "Father, I have killed men with this hand." His voice shook. "I walked through Akado Fortress and saw all the slaughtered men. I saved Yazuno Fortress from being taken by the Talsh, but I had to slay Talsh soldiers to do it. Many of the men who came here from Kanbal and Rota to support us have died for our sake. Those men have families that will never see them again.

"I am a corrupted, polluted, filthy murderer. I am no longer a pure imperial prince, and cannot be so again."

Chagum saw the Mikado's face go pale. It had been more than two years since Chagum had last seen him, but the Mikado hadn't changed at all.

The Mikado stared at Chagum for a few moments, then said quietly, "What is it that you expect from me, then? Is this display meant to make me feel shame at sending you as a hostage to Sangal? Or to boast about your victory at Yazuno?"

Chagum's Rotan and Kanbalese guards gasped. Chagum heard them, but he didn't turn to look at them. He swallowed down his rage and embarrassment. This...is my father.

Everything about the Mikado was familiar: his voice, his appearance, his constant and unwavering disapproval. Chagum closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, then faced his father again.

"I want only one thing from you," Chagum said. "I want you to save this country."

"Why do you say I should save it, as if you are giving me a command?"

"You closed the borders and blinded us to the changing situation on the northern continent," Chagum said. "The Talsh have landed. The only way to save New Yogo now is to accept the proposal of alliance made by Rota and Kanbal."

The nobles and assembled officials appeared shocked.

"The King of Rota has already sent fifty thousand men to Sangal to protect New Yogo from being invaded from the Sangal peninsula. Rota

has refused all trade overtures from Talsh and blockaded its harbors. Prince Raul intends to conquer New Yogo first and use its resources and people to invade the rest of the continent. We must make sure that doesn't happen."

Karyou went very pale. Shuga watched Chagum, unable to look away.

"I have a combined army of thirty thousand men sent from Rota and Kanbal to save us," Chagum said. "We would not have been able to hold on to Yazuno Fortress without them. I've fought with them the whole way here from Kanbal. We've suffered many losses--more than two thousand. The corpses on the battlefields I've seen number at least ten thousand. By my estimation, the Talsh have lost fewer than five thousand men."

The nobles and assembled officials still looked nervous, but they seemed heartened that the Yogoese army had been able to make at least a small dent in the Talsh army.

"We destroyed the Talsh army at Yazuno, but the general situation of the country hasn't changed," Chagum said. "The Talsh will send another army. They're nowhere near defeated."

The Mikado turned to Army General Radou. "Is that true?" he asked.

Radou stood up and looked at Chagum, red-faced and angry. "Disregard his words," he said. "This information has not been verified and cannot be trusted. Isn't that right, Karyou?"

Karyou stood up and bowed to the Mikado. "What my brother says is true. We've received few reports from the south, and we only very recently learned that Yazuno was saved. Based on this new information,

I pulled back all the troops we can from the south and east to better protect the capital this morning."

The court nobles whispered and tittered among themselves. Radou gaped at his younger brother like he'd suddenly become unrecognizable.

"The most important thing now is protecting the capital," Karyou said. "If the Talsh army attacks from the east, we need to be prepared. I'm only seeing to Kosenkyo's defense."

Radou seemed to calm down somewhat. "Then the capital is secure. We have no need for this allied army."

Chagum faced the Mikado and said, "The Blue Bow River is going to overflow. Kosenkyo will flood."

Karyou and Shuga exchanged surprised glances.

Chagum chose his words carefully. One false move risked closing off his father's heart completely. He had to be made to listen so that the people of Kosenkyo would be saved.

"Father," Chagum said, "do you know anything about Nayugu?"

"Nayugu? You mean that other world that the Yakoo believe in?"

"Yes," Chagum said, "though more people than just the Yakoo believe in it. It goes by many names on the continent--Nayugu, Noyook, Nayugul."

"And what does this have to do with the flooding of the Blue Bow River?" the Mikado snapped.

"It has everything to do with it," Chagum said. He spoke about what he'd seen in the caves underneath the Royal Palace of Kanbal. The

spirits in Nayugu had gathered there to mate. The water level in Nayugu was so high there that it covered the mountains. Kanbal had already suffered landslides and flooding, but because their clan lords had warning, most of the people had evacuated to high ground.

The Mikado started to appear interested. The Yusa Mountains and the Misty Blue Mountains were close. What affected one mountain range often affected the other. "You are concerned that what has happened in Kanbal will happen here."

Chagum nodded. "If the river floods, the entire city will be in danger, but especially the Upper Fan. We need to get everyone we can to safety while we still have time."

All of the assembled nobles and court officials started talking at once. The Mikado raised his hand, commanding silence. His eyes passed over Gakai and settled on Shuga.

"Master Star Reader," he said, "you gave me warning of such a disaster, did you not?"

Shuga stood up, then bowed deeply. "I did, Your Imperial Majesty."

Karyou stiffened in his seat. The unrest in the room was near to breaking point. Everyone knew that Shuga was Chagum's tutor and had always supported him at court.

"With respect," Shuga said, "I am not the only one of the Master Star Readers to have seen the portent of disaster. Ozoru, the other apprentice of the Holy Sage, did as well."

"What?" Ozoru asked, frowning. "What is it that I'm supposed to know?"

"When we were in closed conference with the other Star Readers, what did you see?"

"The portent of disaster," he said. "Some believed there would be a flood, but we have to do more research."

"You knew that the disaster was a flood, but did not inform me?" the Mikado asked.

"Ozoru knows the reason for that as well," Shuga said.

"What is it, then?" the Mikado asked testily.

"The Holy Sage commanded us to ignore the portent," Ozoru said.

Outrage as the news shook the hall. Shuga looked at Ozoru and said, "Just because we were told to ignore it doesn't mean it isn't there," Shuga said. "We've all seen it."

Ozoru nodded. "We sent out Star Readers to the bank of the Blue Bow River yesterday morning. We confirmed that the water level of the river is indeed high. There may be a flood at any time."

"I ask again," the Mikado said, "why I was not told as soon as this portent was confirmed."

Shuga didn't say anything for a long while. He glanced up, then looked down. "Forgive me, your Imperial Majesty, but I am at a loss for how to answer."

More whispers in the hall. The Mikado sat back in his throne and forced his expression blank.

Chagum had arrived in Kosenkyo just after the ceremony to pray for victory in war. He seemed to have come in answer to the Mikado's prayers.

The Mikado remembered Shuga telling him about the Portent of Great Change. The nobles in the hall finished speaking to one another and fell silent. The Mikado stared at them all as they averted their eyes.

When the Mikado's gaze fell on Chagum, Chagum didn't look away. For the first time in his life, Chagum looked his father in the eyes.

He's not looking at me. His eyes are on me, but it's like he sees right through me.

The Mikado saw something in Chagum's face that was difficult to describe. Chagum thought he saw something like understanding or compassion, but then he blinked, and the Mikado's eyes were as glassy and expressionless as ever.

"This disaster is the work of Ten no Kami," the Mikado said. "The flood will cleanse and purify Kosenkyo. I, who am still pure of all defilement, will abide his judgement. I do not believe I am in error."

Chagum was about to say something, but Radou stood up and interrupted him. "The Mikado is never in error!" he shouted. "Heed his words!"

Chagum tried to say something again, but Radou was still shouting. "Who is this strange person who looks like Prince Chagum but behaves nothing like him? Impostor! Liar!"

The assembled nobles started whispering again.

Radou shook with rage. "You were sent as a hostage to Sangal. Why did they let you go? Could it be that they wanted you to invade our weakened nation with the armies of Kanbal and Rota so that you can seize rule for yourself?"

Chagum's guards stood up. Chagum raised a hand before they could speak.

"I will abide the judgment of Ten no Kami, and wait for our city to be purified!" Radou shouted.

The Mikado didn't look at Radou. Chagum thought that he looked suddenly sad. Something in Chagum's chest ached at the sight. His father had lived his entire life in the Imperial Palace, revered as the child of a god. He'd sincerely believed that his purity would be effective in saving New Yogo from natural disasters and invading armies, but now... Chagum got the sense that the Mikado had seen through all the pretense for the first time ever.

Or maybe he recognized his own hypocrisy. He had ordered his own son assassinated, not once but twice, all for the sake of his reputation. If he was the soul of the nation, then his soul could not be called pure.

But New Yogo had been founded on the myth of the Mikado's divinity. Even if the Mikado understood that he wasn't capable of saving Kosenkyo through purity, he couldn't abandon the lie now, at this late stage. He was forced to commit to it, as he had for his entire life. In the eyes of New Yogo's people, the Mikado and the nation were one and the same. That meant the Mikado could not waver, go back on a decision, or admit to error. The child of a god did not make errors. The Mikado refused to make a mockery of his own life, even to tell the truth.

The sadness disappeared from the Mikado's eyes as his expressionless mask took hold. "Chagum," the Mikado said, "you are free to choose your own path."

Chagum felt a chill go straight through him.

"You are free to use the Star Readers to evacuate the city and get the common people to higher ground," he said. "I shall remain here. I have no intention of relying on foreigners to aid us. I have no interest in killing. Use our armies as you wish. I believe that Ten no Kami will purify this land, destroy our enemies and lead our nation into a glorious future. I will not consider alternate proposals regarding what is happening. But you and I are both descended from Ten no Kami, Chagum. I must believe that he will place us on the right path."

Chagum swallowed down a hot lump in his throat and couldn't speak. He and his father had both chosen their paths. All they had to do now was walk them.

Chagum knelt down and brought his forehead to the floor. His throat felt tight as he forced out, "Goodbye, father."

Chapter 5 - A General's Choices

Talsh General Shubal sank into a chair near the fire, watching the drizzling rain out the window of the fortress. "I'm glad we got here before it started to rain," he said.

An Ormese lieutenant passed him a mug of mulled wine called baran. He accepted the cup, but didn't turn away from the window. The lieutenant poured himself more mulled wine. When General Shubal had that expression, it meant that he was thinking deeply about a critical decision. As soon as he made his decision, the army would know exactly what to do.

Shubal was a veteran of many battles and many invasions. His lieutenant felt no anxiety as General Shubal considered his choices.

After the Talsh victory at the Tarano Plains, Shubal instructed his eldest son Rashuban to bring his army up from the Sangal peninsula as reinforcements. As soon as those reinforcements arrived, Shubal could leave behind enough men to keep the army's supply train moving and attack New Yogo's capital from the east.

There was a betrayer inside the Imperial Palace, Karyou, whom General Shubal believed to be trustworthy. They passed messages back and forth about the war situation using hawks. Akado Fortress had not been reinforced after its initial destruction, so Rashuban should be able to march his army to meet his father's without meeting any resistance along the way.

Settling down in this fortress for a short stay made Shubal and his men feel like they were shedding a second skin. It was a time to rest

before their final charge. They would march on the capital when Karyou gave them the signal.

Other news came from the capital that surprised Shubal. A large army was moving in from the west, in the direction of Rota. They were mostly cavalry forces, and the army certainly wasn't Talsh.

"Twenty thousand, you said?" Shubal asked. "So many...where did they come from?"

He'd thought the fighting strength of New Yogo to be thirty thousand, all told. An army this large appearing out of nowhere didn't make sense. The Talsh army had wiped out at least fifteen thousand men at the Tarano Plains. Talsh had also conquered the fortresses along the coast, which accounted for another three thousand men. Shubal had expected the capital to be defended with something like seven thousand men.

"It's not a Yogoese army," Shubal's lieutenant said. "By their armor, it seems like they came from Rota and Kanbal."

Shubal frowned. *If only that blasted army had arrived just a little later...*

If Rota and Kanbal had sent armies, that meant they must have formed an alliance with New Yogo. Just when the nation seemed to be in his grasp, this army appeared to snatch away his victory. Shubal called together the Yogoese magic weavers that he employed as spies and asked them why they hadn't told him about this army sooner.

The magic weavers all appeared grim. "You should have received this news some weeks ago, but none of the hawks we use as messengers ever flew back."

"Why not? Don't tell me they all got lost."

"No. These weren't regular hawks. We can use our magic weaving to direct their movements and see things through their eyes. We would be able to help guide them back to familiar territory if they became lost.

"I suspect the enemy is also capable of using this kind of magic weaving, which they used to attack or misdirect our hawks."

"I thought you told me that the Mikado of New Yogo despised magic weaving and never made use of it," Shubal snapped.

The magic weavers all nodded. "That's true. The Mikado didn't make use of magic weaving; we know that for certain. The armies of Rota and Kanbal do make use of it, though."

"I'm aware of a group of people in Rota called the River People," one of the magic weavers said. "They are said to be able to connect their souls to beasts and birds, much as we can."

Shubal rubbed his chin. *So this all has to do with Rota...*

The problem now was the deployment of Talsh troops. Current battle plans had the second, third and fourth army units arriving later, after the capital was already conquered.

Shubal did mental math on army numbers. Kanbal's army was not large, but its warriors were renowned on the continent. Rota's was larger, but they'd split their forces to protect the Sangal peninsula. Even so, the combined armies of New Yogo, Rota and Kanbal were a considerable threat.

Shubal smiled coldly. New Yogo was a strange nation in that it was not warlike at all. When Talsh first declared war, New Yogo had sealed off its borders and rejected all help from its neighbors. By all accounts,

New Yogo had never fought a war. Nearly all of its soldiers were raw recruits.

If the new army had arrived at Kosenkyo even five days later, the Mikado would be dead and Talsh victory would be assured. He hadn't expected Rota to mobilize in New Yogo's defense, either, since Rota was in the middle of a civil war. With the wealthy southern clan lords supporting the Talsh, Shubal didn't consider Rota to be a problem. He'd assumed that Rota was as good as conquered.

Rota being conquered was the key to Prince Raul's strategy. With Rota fallen and New Yogo attacked from two sides, the northern continent would fall swiftly under Talsh dominion.

That was the original plan, anyway.

A chill went up Shubal's spine. The advantage no longer belonged to the Talsh. He was reminded of playing the board game tul, which involved protecting a carefully fortified position. Just like in real life, one simple move could cause the opponent's defenses to crumble. Shubal looked down at his bloodlessly pale hands and thought of his son.

The Rotan and Kanbalese armies must have come through the Nabal Pass or the Samal Pass; no other ways through the mountains were passable for such a large force. Which way had they gone? Nabal Pass was closer to the capital, but going through Samal Pass would allow the army to support Akado Fortress and Yazuno Fortress.

If the army had come from Samal Pass, it would run into his son's forces, marching in from the west. There was no time now to warn him of the danger. Shubal thought of his son's face and looked at the rain.

He might have lost, but I'm sure he's alive. He'll come back to the Tarano Plains soon. He'll have the supply lines all set up when I arrive.

If the supply lines weren't created, the Talsh army would soon face a shortage of critical goods like food and medicine. He wondered if the Yogoese would burn the capital as they had Shirogai, to prevent its resources from falling into Talsh hands. That might be the only way the Yogoese could wage war effectively: destroy their own land and let the Talsh army starve to death.

Shubal had received no word by hawk from the Tarano Plains recently, so he had no idea if the supply lines had been established or not. If Rota had already cut them off at the Tarano Plains, then the Talsh army was already in trouble.

What should I do?

March on the Tarano Plains himself? But that would leave the Sangal peninsula undefended, and he ran the risk of being separated from Talsh reinforcements sailing in behind him. He would be sandwiched between Rotan and New Yogo armies if he did that.

Shubal thunked his wine glass on the table. "Prepare a feast for the men tonight, with wine. Let them all eat their fill."

"Yes, sir," his lieutenant said. "Is this to celebrate that we'll be taking the capital soon?"

"Yes, that's exactly what it is," he said. "Make sure everyone's happy and ready to fight."

Part 4: The Flood

Chapter 1 - Chagum, Assassin

Refugees poured over Bird Shadow Bridge like a line of ants with their belongings strapped to their backs. Shuga watched them trail into the steep hills to the west called the Moon Plateau. Ox carts clogged the way, slowing the speed of the procession. It had rained since the previous evening, so the ground was muddy and the air smelled like trampled grass.

This rain won't help the water level in the river any, Shuga thought. There wasn't much time left to evacuate everyone. Once the river overflowed, the bridge wouldn't be usable.

Shuga had prepared the Star Palace for evacuation immediately after receiving Chagum's order. It had been two days since the proclamation of the coming disaster was announced in the city. The most important records and tools had already been packed and taken to the Mountain Palace to the north.

The court nobles had also commenced evacuation plans. Most of them had headed to the Mountain Palace as well, but there wasn't room for all of them there. The few nobles who still remained in the capital bickered over where they should evacuate to.

The armies of Rota and Kanbal were camped on the Moon Plateau just outside Kosenkyo. Chagum was staying in an army tent in their camp. A spear wielder hailed Shuga's ox cart as he passed by. He recognized him at the same King's Spear that had protected Crown Prince Karnan in Sangal many years ago. Apparently, he was Chagum's bodyguard now.

Shuga got off his cart, looked up at the Kanbalese bodyguard and asked, "Are His Majesty's injuries severe?"

The bodyguard frowned. "Most of them aren't, but he got a deep sword wound at Yazuno Fortress. He saw that our forces were about to be surrounded by the enemy and charged. He was attacked by a Talsh cavalryman before we could catch up to him. I'd never seen curved blades like the ones the Talsh use before that battle."

The bodyguard started walking. Shuga followed him.

The bodyguard shrugged as he walked. "His Majesty dodged the worst of it, but the wound in his left shoulder still severe. He refused to have it treated until after the battle. His life is no longer in danger from it."

Shuga clutched his own left shoulder in sudden sympathy. "Did His Majesty kill the Talsh soldier?" Shuga asked.

"Yes," the bodyguard said. He sounded sad. "When the man lifted his sword, His Majesty used the gap in his defenses and stabbed. I believe the pain of causing that death was worse than that of his wound. I never believed he would do something like that himself; I wasn't sure he was capable of it. I don't think he was sure, either."

Shuga nodded. That sounded like Chagum.

"He's been resistant to further medical treatment," the bodyguard said. "He keeps insisting that he's fine."

The bodyguard stopped outside an army tent that looked identical to all the others. "Prince Chagum, Lord Shuga is here to see you."

Chagum gave them permission to enter. The bodyguard lifted a tent flap and invited Shuga to go inside.

Chagum sat in an improvised chair inside the tent. He wasn't wearing his helmet, but he was wearing the rest of his armor, which looked a bit weather-beaten.

"Thanks, Kahm," Chagum said. "I want to talk with Shuga alone for a little while. Please wait outside the tent, and don't let anyone else in."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Kahm said. He bowed, then left the tent.

Chagum faced Shuga. He looked exhausted, like he hadn't slept in days.

"Your Majesty," Shuga said, bowing slightly. "I wasn't sure I'd ever see you again."

Chagum covered his face with his right hand and looked down. He was crying. "I never thought I'd see you again, either," he said quietly.

He and Shuga sat in chairs near a low fire in the center of the tent. Shuga frowned a little and said, "I heard you haven't been getting your wound regularly treated," he said. "Is that true?"

"Yeah," he said, glancing down at his injured shoulder. "I'm fine. There's no point in treating it more." He started unwinding the bandage around his shoulder with practiced ease. "At first I couldn't stand how tight the dressings were, but now I feel defenseless whenever they're off."

Chagum lifted his head and smiled. "Honestly, I'm just happy to be alive. That's all thanks to you and Jin."

Shuga shook his head. "We didn't do anything, Your Majesty. You saved yourself."

Chagum's smile grew wider. "Didn't you order Jin not to assassinate me?"A Star Reader's alsam medal hung around Chagum's neck. It had been covered by the bandages. Shuga had given it to Jin to pass to Chagum while they were in Sangal. "I've worn this during my whole long journey," Chagum said. "And you and Jin sent Balsa messages to search for me, right? If Balsa hadn't found me in time, I'd be dead, and then Kanbal and Rota would never have agreed to send their armies to help us."

Chagum closed his eyes for a moment, then shook his head a little to clear it. "I've been traveling for such a long time… It's been hard. There were a lot of times when I thought I might die. But I also saw a lot of wonderful things and met new friends."

The light in Chagum's eyes was as bright as ever. "I crossed the ocean on a ship captained by a pirate," he said. "I didn't like it at first, but it was a lot of fun, in the end. She and the Sangalese pirates taught me how to swim and dive. The thing that made me happiest was going with Balsa to Kanbal, though."

Shuga leaned forward. "Where did you meet Balsa?" he asked.

Chagum grinned. "In northern Rota, in the middle of a storm," he said. "Are you sure you want to hear all this? It's a long story."

"Of course I do," Shuga said. "Tell me everything."

Chagum told Shuga about Balsa saving him from an assassin in the nick of time, and about his journey to Kanbal with Balsa. As he spoke, Shuga felt like he had gone on the journey with Chagum himself.

"Balsa and I separated in Kanbal," Chagum said. "She wanted to warn Torogai and Tanda about the flood that's coming. I hope she came

back safely, but I still don't know."

Shuga smiled. "Don't worry, Your Majesty. I'm sure Balsa arrived back safely and warned Torogai with plenty of time to spare." He told Chagum about the dream he'd had of Torogai.

"Really?" Chagum asked. "I'm so relieved." Chagum's clenched fists relaxed in his lap. Then he frowned like his wound pained him.

"You should really have your shoulder looked at again, Your Majesty," Shuga said.

Chagum glared at Shuga for a moment, but then he nodded. He removed the rest of his bandages, revealing a red and angry-looking cut. The edges of the wound weren't red, but greenish-brown and oozing pus.

"I didn't think it would be this bad," Shuga said. "You must have it washed and re-dressed right away, or the infection will only worsen."

Chagum ordered hot water to be brought in. Shuga cleaned the puss from his shoulder carefully. Chagum stared at his shoulder, fascinated, as if he didn't recognize what it was. His expression was strangely blank. Shuga finished cleaning the wound and started putting on new bandages.

"You should consider your own health and safety more, Your Majesty," Shuga said. "If this wound had gone on untreated for a little longer, it might have killed you."

Chagum shifted a little in his seat. "I've seen so many dead and injured people—people who've died in fire, or battle, with wounds like mine. And I can't stop thinking about why. Why do we have to do this? What is it all for?"

"The Talsh forced your hand," Shuga said. "New Yogo has never been at war, and we're bad at it. Perhaps Talsh knows the reasons for war better than we do." Shuga faced the fire, where he was making medicine. He checked on the stewing herbs, then turned back to Chagum.

"I wanted to send a message to the King of Rota proposing an alliance when it became clear that you'd been kidnapped," Shuga said, "but I could not move the Mikado to act, and he would have rejected such an alliance even if the King of Rota had agreed to it. I couldn't do anything when the Mikado and Army General Radou closed the borders. Everything just progressed until was completely out of control."

Shuga stared into space with darkness in his eyes. "I have erred, but I do not know how to atone. You should never have had to see all those corpses, all those lives lost because of my failure to stop the war from happening here. I tried, though I'm not proud of the methods I used."

Chagum frowned at Shuga in incomprehension.

"Army Lieutenant Karyou and I are informants for the Talsh," Shuga said.

Chagum's eyebrows shot up.

"It was the only way I could think of to save the country," Shuga said. "I was the one who made sure our fortresses would be sparsely defended, to minimize casualties as the Talsh marched north. I've known about the Talsh army advancing from the east for weeks. The western Talsh army will combine with that one and surround the capital. It was my plan to assassinate the Mikado in exchange for the Talsh sparing the city. The Talsh agreed to this arrangement, but…"

Chagum looked at Shuga without saying a word. The fire crackled in front of them. Wind flapped against the sides of the tent. Chagum felt the desperation that the Star Readers and nobles in the Imperial Palace must have felt during the last two terrible years of his absence in Shuga's hooded gaze.

"If I were still in the capital, I might have chosen to do the same thing," Chagum said. "The previous Holy Sage would have, too, if he wasn't able to move my father to act in another way. He would have to, in order to keep the country and its founding myth going. Going along with my father's plan would mean no country, but defying him would mean that the child of Ten No Kami was fallible and human. To prevent that knowledge from spreading, the Holy Sage would have no choice but to remove the Mikado from the picture." He sighed. This expression didn't shift, but he looked sad, somehow.

"Army General Radou has requested an audience with you, Your Majesty," Shuga said quietly. "Have you granted it?"

"No," Chagum said, shaking his head. "I don't want to see that man, but I suppose I should. Help me get my shirt on."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

Chagum left his sword helmet behind in the war tent and went out into the army camp with Shuga following him. Both Army General Radou and his lieutenant and brother Karyou were at the edge of the camp, waiting to be admitted. The sun broke though the sparse cloud cover overhead, making Radou squint.

Chagum stopped in front of Radou and said, "You wanted to see me?"

Radou nodded. Chagum's guards materialized at his sides. Kahm rubbed his chin and frowned at Chagum's visitors.

"You brought soldiers here from foreign nations," Radou said. "Don't you believe we have a great deal to discuss?" He did not use Chagum's imperial title.

Anger flashed in Chagum's eyes. Kahm bristled and ran forward, but Chagum raised a hand to stop him. "It's fine, Kahm," he said. "I'll hear him out. Pull everyone back for a moment and let us talk."

Kahm scowled, but he did as commanded. He and the other guards took ten steps away from Chagum.

"We've been ordered by His Imperial Majesty to hand over control of our army and the evacuation efforts to you," Radou said. He knelt down, drawing a sword with a golden blade. "This sword is my treasured possession. I ask you to take it, Your Majesty."

Chagum was about to accept the sword when he saw something glinting out of the corner of his eye. It was a dagger, poorly concealed in Radou's sleeve.

"Die, and rid us of your foul corruption!" Radou shouted in fury. He slashed the blade of the dagger at Chagum's neck before Chagum could react. Chagum stepped backward on instinct so that the dagger caught on his shirt. It grazed his neck, but the wound was not deep. Chagum seized the golden sword in Radou's hand and jumped back.

Radou threw his dagger down and drew the sword at his hip.

Kahm and Chagum's bodyguards mobilized swiftly in his defense. Karyou saw his brother preparing to attack Chagum again and drew his own sword.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty!" Kahm, Shuga and the other guards called out in one voice as they ran toward Chagum.

Chagum touched the shallow cut on his neck and gaped at Radou in shock.

"Are you hurt?" Shuga asked from behind Chagum.

"It's just a scratch," Chagum said. "I'm fine." There wasn't a lot of blood, but Chagum's face looked very pale. He looked back at Radou, who had his sword raised. Radou trembled with rage as blood rushed to his head. Chagum somehow felt that he was at the fortress near Shirogai again, talking in all the destruction and corpses. He touched the cut on his neck with his left hand, then sprinted off in the direction of his tent.

Someone seized Chagum's elbow, preventing him from running off. It suddenly hurt to breathe. He felt cold and clammy all over and his knees felt weak. Bright points of light danced along his sight line.

Chagum managed to break the grip on his elbow and walk determinedly to his tent. He collapsed there, unconscious, seeing and feeling nothing else.

Chapter 2 - Nightfall

It was past sunset, but the inside of Chagum's tent was as bright as day. Chagum lay on his soft cotton shilya bedding, shivering and sweating profusely. He was asleep or unconscious with his mouth half-open and his breathing labored. Chagum had many visitors and guards watching over him, whispering and talking, but Chagum didn't open his eyes.

The doctor claimed that Chagum must have collapsed from over-exhaustion. His shoulder was severely injured and he'd been traveling and fighting for weeks, which was enough to wear anyone out. "Sleep is the best medicine," he said to Shuga. "We'll let him sleep."

It was the middle of the night before the doctor and nurse retired to their own beds to sleep, leaving Shuga alone in the tent with Chagum. Shuga supported Chagum's head in his lap, encouraging him to drink down the medicine that the doctor had left slowly, pushing on his throat gently to make him swallow on reflex.

Shuga agreed with the doctor: Chagum definitely needed rest. The medicine Shuga was giving him was meant to help him sleep more deeply, since poor sleep wouldn't help Chagum heal at all.

He finally pushed himself too far, Shuga thought. *The war, the armies, the evacuation—it's too much. No wonder he's so desperate for rest.*

Radou trying to kill him must have been a shock to the system. Radou's dagger had not wounded Chagum severely, but the attack had profoundly affected the prince's heart and mind. Shuga looked down at

him as he slept and tried to encourage himself. Chagum would awaken soon, after a well-deserved sleep.

There was noise outside Chagum's tent. Someone lifted the tent flap and entered. When Shuga turned to look who it was, he nearly jumped out of his skin.

Jin.

His arms were tied firmly behind his back. Kahm had pushed him inside; Shuga saw him as he also slipped inside the tent. Jin put his face to the ground and said, "I'm sorry for causing a disturbance. I had to see His Majesty no matter what. The guard said I couldn't enter unless I was bound."

Kahm folded his arms. "You serve the Mikado. For all we know, you work for Army General Radou, too, and he just tried to kill Prince Chagum. You aren't trustworthy." He glanced worriedly at Chagum.

"How is he feeling?" Kahm asked.

"He's been sleeping," Shuga said. "He has a slight fever, but the doctor said he would recover."

Both Kahm and Jin appeared openly relieved.

"Lord Kahm," Shuga whispered, "Lord Amusuran has saved His Majesty's life many times in the past. If you're that worried, you can remain in the tent with the spear trained on him."

Kahm looked uncertain for a moment, but then he nodded at Shuga and untied the ropes binding Jin's hands.

Jin went to his knees at Chagum's side and placed his forehead to the ground. "Your Majesty…" His eyes overflowed with tears. "After

suffering through so much to get back here, for something like this to happen…"

It had been a year since Jin had watched Chagum jump overboard and swim away toward Rota's southern coast. Jin had believed Chagum's goal of an alliance with Rota and Kanbal to be no more than a child's dream, but he'd actually achieved it. He was still alive despite all he had been through, and he had finally come back.

Seeing Jin cry made Kahm start to weep as well. "Lord Amusuran…"

Jin clutched at his gut and tried to control his wracking sobs.

"We don't have time to weep," Shuga said. "None of us do. The country is still in danger. I expect the others are watching us?"

Jin nodded, then wiped his tears away with his fists. "They're outside, in the camp." He took a deep breath, then bowed before Chagum again. "The Mikado has commanded us to leave the Imperial Palace without him. He refuses our protection, although we are his shields. It is…unprecedented."

Shuga's eyes widened. "Were all of the Imperial Guards ordered away?"

"Yes," Jin said. "I sent half to the Mountain Palace to defend Tugum and the nobles there. The rest accompanied me to the army camp to protect Prince Chagum."

Jin cast his eyes down. "The Mikado said that Ten no Kami will defend those he deems worthy. He said nothing else to us."

Shuga frowned, then whispered, "Is there anyone left in the palace?"

"The Holy Sage, his apprentices, maids, attendants and the aged servants with no other home have remained. The Mikado did not permit any of the court nobles or their retinues to stay--not even the Queens."

Shuga opened his mouth to ask another question when he heard a ruckus outside. The Rotan Lieutenant Karon entered the tent, looking harried.

"Kahm received a message by hawk," the Karon said. "We need to call a war council immediately."

Kahm and the doctor entered the tent behind Karon. Shuga glanced between Kahm and the Karon and said, "Lord Kahm, Lord Karon, I have a request."

"What is it?" Karon asked.

"I was an apprentice of the Holy Sage for many years and know the inner workings of New Yogo's Imperial Palace. I beg that you permit the Holy Sage, his apprentices, and Army Lieutenant Karyou to attend this war council. They may have information that proves invaluable."

Karon frowned. "Um…that's…"

"You are outsiders," Shuga said. "Members of an outside army, come to help us in our time of need. We are grateful, but you do not understand us. We wouldn't expect you to. I ask that you let us speak for ourselves.

"Besides," Shuga added, "I have an idea. One that might help us turn the tide in the war against the Talsh."

"We'll do it," Kahm said. "Summon who you will."

Shuga nodded gratefully. Karon appeared stunned.

"If Crown Prince Chagum were awake, he would tell us to listen to Shuga. He trusts him implicitly. If Shuga says we need more representatives from New Yogo at the war council, we'll bring them there," Kahm said.

Shuga made to follow Kahm out of the tent, but he glanced back at Chagum before leaving. He bowed deeply to the still-sleeping Chagum, then left.

"I'm all right with inviting the others, but inviting Karyou poses something of a problem," Kahm said.

"I need him here," Shuga said. "He's the key to my plan. Please trust me."

Jin nodded. "I have no obligations to the Mikado any longer."

When Shuga looked back at Jin, he was weeping.

"I never thought I'd see that kid again. When he leaped into that ocean, it's like he was reborn. We have to save him."

Shuga nodded, then kept on walking after Kahm. Jin followed Shuga.

Later, many soldiers and guards gathered outside Chagum's tent. Most of them glanced at the tent with wary apprehension. They hadn't forgotten the attempt made on Chagum's life. Though the war was raging and the world outside the camp was a very dangerous place at the moment, their primary concern was for Crown Prince Chagum.

Shuga approached the assembled soldiers and nodded his head.

Chapter 3 - Shuga's Resolve

Army Lieutenant Karyou rode up to the war camp on a fast horse. He dismounted and was relieved of his weapons, then approached Shuga, Kahm, Karon, and Jin.

There was a large desk set up in the center of a group of war tents. There was a map on it that captured the current status of the Talsh invasion in black ink.

"I thank you for allowing me to be part of this war council," Army Lieutenant Karyou said. "It is good for us all to share our thoughts about the current situation--Rota, Kanbal, and New Yogo."

Karon nodded in approval. "We were planning to hold this war council largely without New Yogo's participation, but Lord Shuga asked us to change our minds. It is only natural for you to be here. The men in your armies will fight and die as surely as ours will."

Karon reached out for a piece of parchment on the desk. "We've received a message by hawk from our Rotan spies, the Kashal. The army that defeated New Yogo's forces on the Tarano Plains is marching north, and will be here in a matter of days.

"However, this invasion force was expected. The invasion force from the east is the surprise. They are a completely different army--and they're half a day's march from Kosenkyo."

Karyou nodded, then glanced at Shuga. Shuga stared back and said nothing.

"It is my recommendation that we lure the Talsh into the capital with a token force, then wait for the Blue Bow and Bird Song Rivers to overflow, sweeping away both armies," Karon said.

Shuga shook his head. "We must all flee, Lieutenant Karon. We cannot abandon men here to die. If they remain in the city until the flood begins, there will be no safe place for them to go. "

Shuga frowned down at the map. "It's true that the flood will come. There isn't much distance between the two rivers, and the rising water will make the terrain muddy and difficult to traverse. That might buy us enough time to get away."

Karon shook his head. "The Talsh spies are fast and clever. If we abandon the capital completely, they'll know. They might even find out the reason why. Some of their spies are mixed in among the common people. I'm certain they already know that Crown Prince Chagum has returned and that the Portent of Great Disaster is upon us."

Shuga tapped the Blue Bow River on the map. It was to the east of the capital. "Talsh forces will pass this way. The river hasn't flooded yet, and likely won't for at least a few days. If they keep marching, they'll be trapped in the river basin and won't be able to get to high ground before the water level is rising. Besides, even if we abandon the capital, the Talsh won't. It's too important to their conquest, symbolically if in no other way."

"Time is working in Talsh's favor," Karon said. "If the capital is washed away and the Talsh somehow avoid damage, it'll be a devastating blow for New Yogo. If the Talsh manage to draw things out, they could cut off the Sangal and Rota borders to prevent us from

receiving supplies and reinforcements. Our only chance is to let the flood waters destroy the Talsh along with the city."

Karon thought for a moment. "Time is the problem. We need to lure the Talsh into attacking before the flood begins, then retreat as fast as possible."

Shuga considered, then pointed to the map. "We can lure them from here," he said, pointing to a grassy plain below the Moon Hills.

"Wouldn't it be better to lure them from a hill?" Karon asked. "That area is completely exposed. The Talsh will see us from a mile off, and they're better at taking advantage of the terrain than we are."

Shuga smiled. "This is the perfect place, specifically because the Talsh can see it from a mile off. We'll be an easy target, and they'll come right for us."

Karon frowned. Jin leaned over the map, then muttered, "I see. It could work."

"That place is all rice fields," Shuga said, "though the rice was blighted and neglected because of the war, so now it just looks like a grassy plain from a distance. It will be easy for us to build dams and ditches to control the water. If we destroy the dams during our flight, all the water will rush at the Talsh army at once."

Kahm's eyes lit up. "That's a good idea." But then he frowned. "I understand the broad outlines of the plan, but not how we're going to get away in time. We have to cross one river or the other--or both--to evacuate such a large army."

"That's where Karyou is going to help us," Shuga said.

Everyone looked askance at Karyou.

"Karyou and I have been in secret talks with the Talsh army for a long time," Shuga said. "Before we knew about the flood, we planned to assassinate the Mikado and hand the city over to the Talsh army without a fight. In exchange, they would have spared our lives and the people in the city."

Kahm's eyebrows rose in indignation. "What?"

"Consider our options," Shuga said coldly. "What would you have done? Would it be better for the people in the city to die, and have their homes and fields put to the torch? We had scarcely nine thousand men left and were unaware that allies were coming. The Talsh number thirty thousand, at least, and are experienced in war. I decided it would be better for our nation to be conquered than slaughtered."

Kahm and Karon gave Shuga icy stares. "Did we really invite more Talsh spies to our war council?"

"It's obvious that we're not thinking that way now," Shuga said. "Don't toss around pointless accusations." He turned to Karyou. "Are Talsh spies and messengers still mixed in among the refugees leaving the city?" he asked.

"They are," Karyou said.

"Then we'll send out this message: ‘The Mikado has decided to discard the capital on advice from the Holy Sage, due to a Portent of Great Disaster seen in the Heavens. He will send the Crown Prince south to seek a new capital. However, Crown Prince Chagum received a grave in the fighting at Yazuno Fortress.'

"Right now, everyone is protecting Crown Prince Chagum, but if he were to die, the armies of Kanbal and Rota would throw their support

behind Third Prince Tugum. With a message like that, the Talsh will expect us to march south and secure our supply lines on the Tarano Plains before searching for a new capital. The army at Yazuno will march to the Samal Pass and unite with the remainder of the Rotan cavalry force. That means that only the Rotan and Kanbalese forces will be left behind to protect Kosenkyo. At least, that's what the Talsh will think."

Karyou listened to Shuga speak with his mouth half-open.

"That's right," Shuga said. "We'll pretend to sell out Rota and Kanbal. We'll claim that we have the last surviving heirs of the imperial family under our protection, and that the only soldiers left for the Talsh to defeat are the Rotans and Kanbalese. We'll make it look like we've set a trap for Rota and Kanbal's forces at Kosenkyo so that the Talsh armies will leave us alone while we travel."

Shuga finished speaking. No one else spoke for a full minute. Everyone was considering Shuga's plan.

Army Lieutenant Karyou wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Do you really think the Talsh would believe us, if we sent out such messages?"

"They have no reason to distrust us," Shuga said. "And they're after conquest, not our lives. If they can conquer New Yogo's capital without killing New Yogo's people, they will." Shuga looked Karyou in the eyes. "I told Crown Prince Chagum that we were spies for the Talsh Empire. He told me that he would have done the exact same thing in our place. He's approved of our actions so far. We all have the same goal: to save the northern continent from disaster."

Karyou stared at the map for a long while, then looked up at Shuga again. "All right. Let's do it."

Chapter 4 - Rainbow Palace

Shuga returned to Chagum's tent after the war council and found him completely surrounded by soldiers. An ox-drawn cart was stopped just outside the tent. As Shuga passed it by, a young man lifted the cover over the cart's window and called out, "Lord Shuga!"

The soldiers around the tent stood up straight, wary of intruders.

The young man left the cart and approached Shuga. "Lord Shuga, may I enter the tent as well?" He was slightly flushed and out of breath.

Shuga hadn't recognized him at first, but this young man was Ruin, Crown Prince Chagum's former attendant.

"Ruin?" Shuga asked. "Did you come here by cart? How did you know where we were?"

Ruin didn't answer. Shuga gestured him into the tent. Ruin sucked in a breath. "Your Majesty!"

The Second Queen sat at Chagum's bedside. She had been sickly for some years and hadn't left the palace in a very long time, but now, she was here. She was supposed to be at the Mountain Palace, but she'd stayed behind after all the other nobles had fled.

Like the Mikado, it was forbidden for the Queens to travel abroad unattended and without permission, for fear that the outside world might sully their purity. No Second Queen in the history of New Yogo had ever visited an army camp before.

"What happened to my son?" The Second Queen asked hoarsely. She was wasted and thin, but the light of strong resolve and courage was in

her eyes. In this state, Shuga thought that Chagum and his mother looked very much alike, though he'd never really noticed the resemblance before.

Two of the Second Queen's attendants had accompanied her and were sitting quietly in a corner of the tent. Shuga sat seiza in front of the Second Queen and bowed his head deeply.

"He'll be fine," Shuga said. "His Majesty is merely sleeping. He fell into a deep sleep after over-exertion. The doctor has been to see him and give him medicine. He should be back to normal in a few days."

"How long as he been asleep?" The Second Queen asked with a frown. "Sleeping for a more than a day can't possibly be healthy, can it?"

"I am certain Crown Prince Chagum will be well enough to ride out and meet the Talsh," Shuga said. "Let's hope it doesn't come to battle."

"I don't want to lose my child again," the Second Queen. "When he was a young child, I let him go with Balsa the spear-wielder to save his life. And she did, but when he came back, there was no one to protect him from other dangers. I don't know how to protect him now."

The Second Queen frowned. "After Chagum came back from the outside world, he…changed. No trace of the boy I knew was left in him. I wanted to see that boy again, more than anything."

The Second Queen's lips trembled. "He was happier outside the palace. It was unlucky, him being born inside it."

The Second Queen stroked her son's hair and wept over him, hands and shoulders shaking violently.

Chagum showed no reaction. He was still deeply asleep. His body was heavy and as cold as ice. He saw the face of the Talsh soldier whose

throat he'd slit in his mind's eye, vivid and bright as if it were illuminated by lightning.

There were corpses churning under his horse's hooves. Blood sprayed across his face. The faces of dead men who had died far from home flashed before Chagum's eyes. Behind it all, his father's face swam behind his eyes. He wondered what his father would think of all this terrible carnage.

Chagum was so tired. He didn't want to move; he felt like he couldn't. He understood that he was having a nightmare, but he couldn't force himself to wake up.

A short time later, Chagum awoke. It was as warm as summer and smelled like clean summer rain. When he opened his eyes, he was in Nayugu.

He breathed in the soothing scent of Nayugu's water, feeling completely soothed. He had smelled so much death lately, but the water of Nayugu had washed him completely clean. He tried to move, but his body was still to heavy. When he tried again, a strange thing happened: his body split into two pieces.

It didn't hurt. Both bodies appeared physically the same. Chagum realized that one body was his physical body in Sagu--that was the one that couldn't move. His spiritual body in Nayugu could move. He floated lightly and easily in the lapis-lazuli colored water. He felt like he was swimming in the southern oceans with the pirate Senna again. The seaweed and plants on the ocean floor were as lush and green as a forest.

A mountain rose out of the ocean. The water was rougher near the surface. The water was so crystal clear that the sky was visible overhead.

Yona Ro Gai gathered around Chagum in great numbers, making a tinkling sound like bells as they glided smoothly through the water.

"Come," one of the Yona Ro Gai said. They took Chagum's hand and swam with him toward the north.

Chagum smelled something vaguely sweet. His heart skipped a beat when he recognized the smell. He had first encountered it in Saahnan,

the Land of Feasting, long ago when he'd hosted the water spirit's egg.

Spirits and Yona Ro Gai passed around him as closely as a school of fish. Chagum swam with them, the sweet scent growing stronger as he advanced further north. He expected to see the army camp or a battlefield, but the Yona Ro Gai were leading him somewhere else.

A deep basin like a crater spread out below Chagum. At the bottom of the basin there were two enormous empty shells. As he came closer, he noticed tiled roofs atop the shells, which appeared very odd. This must be a place in Nayugu that overlapped with Sagu.

"The Imperial Palace..."

He was looking down at the Imperial Palace of New Yogo. The two rounded shells took on some definition: he identified the placement of the Star Palace. Light from the spirits and the clear blue water shone off the shells, bathing the palace in rainbow colors.

Chagum remembered seeing this same shell palace once before. It had shone with all the colors of the rainbow, just like this. The sight reminded him of a memory that he thought he'd forgotten.

When Chagum was very young, he got a high fever and went to bed early. When he awoke, he smelled the sweet scent of the water of Nayugu for the first time. A Yona Ro Gai took his hand and invited him into Nayugu's lapis-lazuli colored water.

He had seen the Imperial Palace in Nayugu then, just as it was now. The light grew brighter, splitting off into shafts of colored light that cut through the water and shone into the sky.

Spirits, fish and water creatures reacted to the light, swimming joyously and buoyantly in the bright water. There were so many of

them, and they all appeared to be playing together.

One of the shafts of light split off and became concentrated into a ball not much larger than a grain of sand. The ball of light shot toward Chagum's chest--

--and then Chagum saw fish fleeing from the deep basin, silver backs gleaming in the light of the rainbow palace.

I wonder why I forgot this place...

Everything had started here. The water spirit had laid its egg while he was still in the Imperial Palace, as a child. His entire life and destiny had changed after that moment.

The two shells in Nayugu had belonged to the water spirit before its death. When the new water spirit was born, the old one died, leaving only its shell behind.

The Yona Ro Gai retained their grip on Chagum's hand. It guided him inside one of the large shells. It was much brighter than Chagum had expected inside. The shell was full of holes, which was how the light got in. The bodies of the Yona Ro Gai--and his own--were reflected on the shell's shiny surface.

Chagum saw countless unhatched eggs on the sea floor. They were many different colors, shapes, and sizes. Nayugu's warm water drifted gently over the eggs. For the first time in ages, Chagum felt the strong desire to *go home*. His mother wasn't here.

Was there some lingering memory of the water spirit still inside him? Chagum felt like he'd been born in two worlds: once in Nayugu, once in Sagu. There was no denying that the water spirit's egg was definitely part of himself.

Chagum felt there was great power in this place: the power of death and rebirth. He felt like he was home, but he also felt like he should go home. Something within him was torn.

He couldn't live in Nayugu. He'd never tried it, but he was certain that his real life and home was in Sagu. He wanted to see his mother again.

All of the eggs below Chagum started to shake in the strengthening current. Chagum looked around in alarm. It was eerily silent, but the water still moved the eggs around. All of Nayugu's water was agitated. Chagum got the sense that something terrible was about to happen.

Chapter 5 - Thread of the Golden Spider

In the heart of the Misty Blue Mountains, there was an enormous tree that very few people had ever stood below. It was in a very inaccessible place. Its roots were deep; it had stood in this spot for many thousands of years.

Yogese magic weavers called this tree the Lord of the Misty Blue Mountains. It had thousands of branches, and the moss growing on its trunk was green and thick. Many mice, insects and birds made their home here. The Lord of the Misty Blue Mountains was like a forest unto itself.

A deep river flowed near the tree. Torogai swam there naked, spinning in circles. Pitted fruit and bird bones floated around her in the water. Torogai had spent five days here, living like a beast in the mountain forest. She dwelt near the Lord of the Misty Blue Mountains and drank of the water that touched its roots in order to absorb some of the great power of its spirit. Her master Norugai had taught her that she must drink only the water in order to absorb its energy in a pure state, but Torogai had eaten birds and fruit from the tree as well. Unlike her master, she needed more than water to sustain her life.

The Thread of the Golden Spider was very challenging for a magic weaver. That was why Norugai had kept it secret for so long. Torogai would need every scrap of strength to perform it successfully. Torogai felt like her old master's eyes were upon her as she made her preparations.

Norugai had been an incredible magic weaver, but the energies she'd manipulated had finally exhausted her strength. She had died as a husk of herself, internal energies completely spent.

Torogai wasn't afraid that the same thing would happen to her, though it seemed likely. Her one regret was that she might not be able to see Tanda, her favorite apprentice, ever again.

Torogai knew that Tanda was still alive somewhere. If he had died, his spirit would have visited her before passing into the next world. He was so kind and good to people--and he'd gone to war in his younger brother's place.

Tanda wasn't as serious about learning and using magic weaving as Shuga, but magic weaving had always been an integral part of his life.

Come back, my stupid apprentice. I haven't taught you everything I know yet.

Torogai sighed. She would have to live through using the Thread of the Golden Spider if she was ever going to teach Tanda anything again.

After that, Torogai slept for most of the next three days. She passed that time spinning dreams of golden webs in the darkness of her mind.

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The magic weaver Gashugai made sweet gruel in a pot over a fire. She added fruit and honey, then stirred it. She passed a serving of the gruel to a girl sitting next to her.

Gashugai had encountered this girl in a nearby village. When she'd told her parents she would need to borrow the girl for a few days, they had given her a sour expression. They needed her help with the rice planting; no hands could be spared. Gashugai had convinced them by telling them about the coming disaster, which their daughter could foresee. She had also saved the family's eldest daughter from a deadly disease some years before.

Their youngest daughter was now twelve years old, and though her life was hard like the rest of her family's, her parents were still happy not to have lost a child. They had permitted Gashugai to take their daughter to Mount Kochi and the river there. They had traveled through the forested mountains. Gashugai had started teaching the girl how to weave to pass the time. The girl liked weaving much better than doing field work. Traveling through the mountains at night was cold and lonely, but she never complained.

This morning was warm. Gashugai ladled some gruel into a bowl and ate it. The gruel was very sweet and warmed her all the way through.

Suddenly, the girl started shaking.

"What's wrong?" Gashugai asked.

The girl turned to face her, but Gashugai got the sense that she was looking past her at something completely different. The bowl of gruel fell from the girl's lap; she got on her knees on the ground.

"Shaking!" she cried out. "The world is shaking!"

Gashugai couldn't feel anything. The fire where it burned was steady, and the ground was solid beneath his feet. The girl ducked and held herself on the ground, terrified.

"It's shaking! There's a wave! It's coming and it will swallow me up!" She closed her eyes. "I'm scared!"

Gashugai wrapped her arms around the girl. "Is Nayugu shaking?" she asked.

The girl was drenched in cold sweat. She nodded. "Everything is shaking," she said. "It's like...it's like a pulse."

She was trembling all over. Gashugai finally started to feel something strange. The wind felt odd, like there was a storm blowing in from far away. But everything around her was completely still. The snow on the peaks of the mountains was still clear and white: it hadn't melted yet.

"What should we do?" Gashugai muttered. "Is this the beginning of the flood?"

Should she send a sho yai--a white bird--to Torogai and tell her what was happening? Or would it be better to wait for a surer sign?

Then the snow on top of the mountains turned to mist and smoke, all at once. Gashugai sucked in a breath. "The snow is melting," she said. "It's time."

Gashugai began chanting the words to form a sho yai. A white thread sprouted from her forehead and shaped itself into the form of a bird.

The snow was rapidly disappearing from the mountains. Everything was melting at an accelerated rate. Gashugai propelled her soul toward the Lord of the Misty Blue Mountains as fast as it would go.

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Torogai was sleeping naked under the tree. Insects crawled all over her skin. There was a bird flying above her head. The beady little eyes of a squirrel fixed on Torogai; its tail swished.

The bird was bright white, trailing more light behind it. More joined it: two from the north, three from the east, and two from the west. She could hear Gashugai speaking.

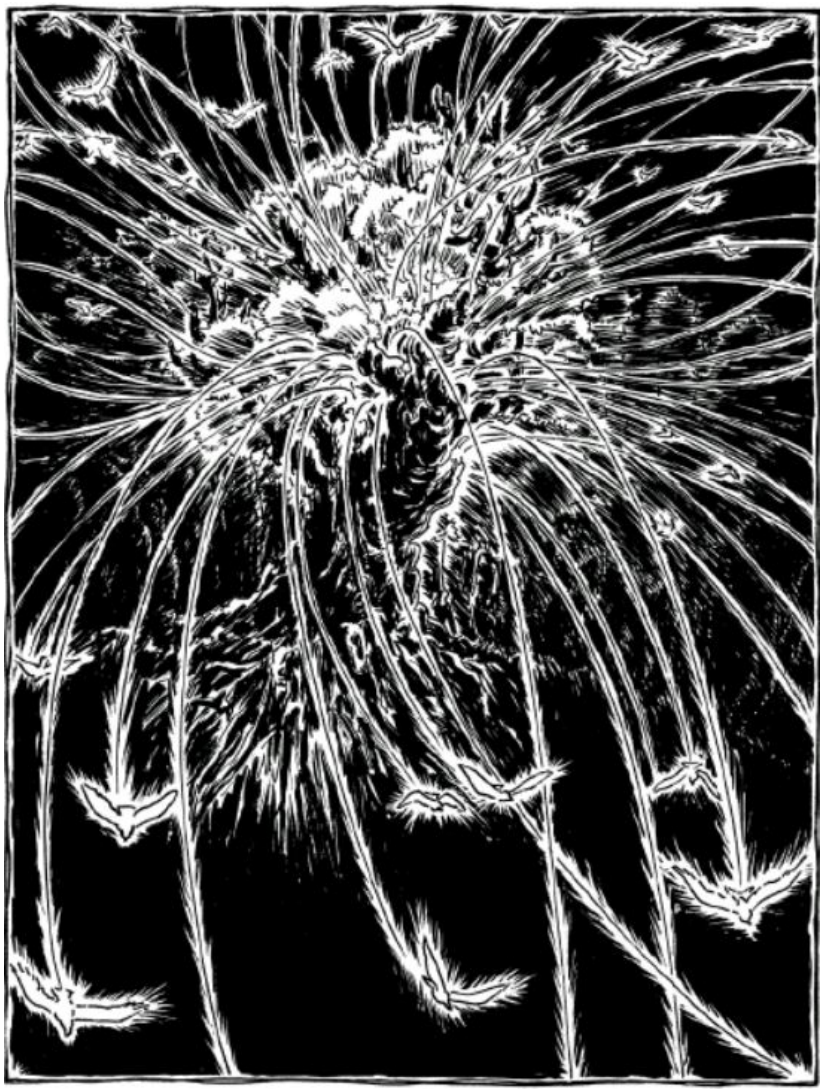
"The snow on Mount Kochi has melted. The river is starting to overflow. Nayugu is suffering a violent earthquake. The child with me who can see it is terrified."

"The snow on Mount Okocha is gone!" Orumugai's voice sounded panicked. "The river's current is violent and the water is rising rapidly."

"I get it," Torogai said, sitting up. "It's time to put my soul to work. She hadn't projected her soul yet, but she was already in terrible pain. Preparing to perform the Thread of the Golden Spider was a taxing process. She took an enormous gulp of the water from the river near the Lord of the Misty Blue Mountains and closed her eyes as the whole world started shaking around her. She felt Orumugai's fear, and Gashugai's, and her own swirling around inside her.

I need all my power now...

This was the hardest thing Torogai had ever done. She returned to sleep and had a dream.



In Torogai's dream, she was a spider: an enormous spider that spun endless ells of golden thread. The thread attached to the living beings around her, sticky. Torogai kept spinning more thread, and more, expanding her golden net.

Torogai kept spinning thread until exhaustion, strengthening and thickening her net until it was like a sheer sheet of golden cloth.

Spread, my golden net. Spread, and spread farther...

The spirits caught in her net were enfolded in her power. The net glimmered with a bright spiritual light. Torogai felt her own energy

being consumed as the golden light gently covered her. Her spider body grew monstrously in size. She heard her own voice in her ears, shouting: "Become birds of light! Fly, fly, fly to the villages!"

The golden thread of the net broke loose from Torogai and the spirits and shot as fast and straight as arrows toward the trees. The threads flew off in all directions; for a moment, it looked like another net was forming in the sky. The trees glowed gold when the thread touched them, just like the animal spirits. Over the mountains and up to the clouds, the thread of the golden spider extended everywhere.

When the threads finally stopped spreading out, they each transformed into a white bird that flew away.

Torogai experienced terrible pain as all the thread contained inside her spider form was expelled from her body. Her attention was fractured between all of the scenes that she'd sent out messages to: she could hear and see everything, although it was hard to concentrate on any one scene for very long. It was all Torogai could do not to scream as pieces of herself scattered all over New Yogo.

Gradually, Torogai's pain eased. She was able to take in more of her own surroundings and what was happening with the white messenger birds. The first thing she saw was a mountain stream near to overflowing with mud churning on its banks.

Hurry, hurry! She sent more birds to the villages nearest the river, since the people nearby didn't have much time to evacuate. Send word to the people washing clothes in the river, children playing, farmers digging ditches for irrigation, fishermen...

When the thread of the golden spider came into contact with the people nearest the river, Torogai screamed, "Run! Run! A flood is coming! Get out of the water and escape to higher ground!"

The people that heard her message fled as fast as they could toward their villages. Villagers gaped in astonishment at the pure white, magical birds that had come to warn them of danger. The golden threads spun by Torogai started disintegrating after all of the messages were sent. She was exhausted, but she kept spinning thread, as much as she could: her work wasn't done yet. She still had to warn the capital.

The fan shape of Kosenkyo spread out across her vision. She saw a tent erected in the foothills near the Imperial Palace and sent a thread there. The thread stuck to Shuga's forehead so that he heard Torogai's message to run.

Torogai wanted to keep warning more people, but she was at her limit. She couldn't send her soul flying any further. She allowed her spirit to drift back toward her body. If she remained in spirit form for much longer, her life could be in danger.

Torogai returned slowly to her senses. She couldn't see anything. She was on her back in mud in the darkness, taking shallow, panting breaths. With her last strength, she faced the tree called the Lord of the Misty Blue Mountains and licked its trunk. The sticky sap on the trunk melted down her throat, making her feel a bit steadier. She hadn't realized how close to death she'd actually been until this moment.

Before she drifted off to sleep again, Torogai envisioned the faces of her two apprentices. She smiled, then surrendered to the darkness surrounding her. She slept without waking for a long time.

Chapter 6 - Kosenkyo

Chagum felt like his body was being engulfed by a great and terrible wave. The eggs bathed in rainbow-colored illumination below him shifted around on the ocean floor. Chagum noticed that his own body was also glowing, along with all the fish, water dwellers, and Nayugu spirits gathered around him.

A chill went up Chagum's spine. A rippling pulse went through the ocean water, and another, setting a rhythm like a heartbeat. The pulse grew stronger, sending the spirits and water dwellers scattering, but they weren't frightened.

"It's a dance," one of the water dwellers whispered in Chagum's ear.

And it was: the spirits of Nayugu danced to the beat set by the pulse. The pulse became even louder and faster, as if all the spirits and their light were interconnected in one great, unheard song.

This must be the marriage of the spirits, Chagum thought. *The Mountain King is choosing a bride.*

The water dwellers grabbed Chagum's hands and started swimming in a straight line. He swam outside, past the huge shells, until the capital as seen from Nayugu was visible again. There were no people anywhere that he could see. He sped toward the Imperial Palace, where his father's private chambers were. The Mikado was probably still inside.

There was an aged servant still inside the palace. Chagum tried to reached out and push the servant outside, but they refused to be

rushed, and Chagum had less influence in Nayugu than he would have had in Sagu. The servant didn't even seem to realize he was there.

"Run!" Chagum yelled. "You have to get away!"

The old servant didn't even turned to face Chagum. Chagum watched the fish and spirits around him dart away at top speed and thought, *Time passes differently in Nayugu and Sagu.*

There was no sound. Nayugu was silent, and sounds from Sagu weren't transmitted to him. The support pillars inside the palace swayed alarmingly in Nayugu, but they swayed silently. Chagum caught a sudden glimpse of muddy water rising up along the tapestry-covered walls. Some walls had completely crumbled. The flood had completely washed away everything on the floor.

Chagum was stunned and didn't want to look, so he closed his eyes. A shockwave ran through him, but it was muffled, as if someone had wrapped him in a blanket. Naguyu's ocean and Sagu's floodwaters overlapped, both moving in cresting waves. Shingles fell from the ceiling and debris floated on the water's surface.

Tears streaked down Chagum's face and fell into the waters of the flood eclipsing his home. He was worried about his father. There was also no sign of the aged servant anywhere. Perhaps both the Mikado and his servant had been washed away.

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Chagum gritted his teeth and swam to higher floors of the Imperial Palace. The flood waters were calmer as he swam up. The spire of the

Star Palace had crumbled and was nowhere to be seen. The wall between the Middle Fan and the Upper Fan was as good as gone, for all it did to prevent more water from seeping in. Chagum cried harder as he remembered the Imperial Palace in all its glory, swimming above the ruined city like a bird in flight.

The flood spread over Kosenkyo in the shape of a fan, starting fast and hard like a tidal wave before feathering out in more gentle waves. Chagum followed the general current of the water to the east. The Misty Blue Mountains loomed large in the sky ahead of him, peaks shining with rainbow-colored light. The light shone over the water, creating a separating line between the earth and the sky. It was a majestic sight, as still as a painting, yet shimmering as the light shifted.

Nayugu spirits from the faraway Yusa Mountains came to this place only once every few centuries to perform the ceremony of the marriage of the spirits. There were so many spirits that Chagum saw few gaps between them from the ocean floor to the sky.

Chagum turned away from the mountains and faced the Moon Hills and the foothills near the capital where the army had been camped. The camp wasn't flooded; Chagum saw tents and a few people moving around from his high vantage point. The abandoned rice fields around the camp sparkled white with pale sunlight.

Soldiers spread out around the base of the mountain. They were facing away from the capital and didn't see the encroaching floodwaters. The Talsh army was ahead of them, entrenched and waiting.

It's a battle! But they can't see…

If the Yogoese soldiers weren't warned in time, the entire battlefield would be washed away, along with them.

Something glinted in the distance, golden and blindingly bright. It looked like gold thread spidering downward from the sky. Chagum's eyes traced the movement of the thread as it contacted earth inside the army camp. The thread bounced upward toward the Misty Blue Mountains, passing Chagum as it soared through the heavens.

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The Second Queen gripped Chagum's hand tightly, then felt his forehead. Chagum tried to open his eyes, but they were so heavy. Everything hurt.

"It's all right," the Second Queen said. "It was just a bad dream. It's time to wake up now."

Shuga looked over the Second Queen's shoulder, trying to gauge Chagum's condition, when he felt something numbing and cold smack him hard across the forehead.

Shuga saw nothing, but the cold sensation pierced him to his soul. This was the result of Torogai's magic weaving. Her message reached him through the Thread of the Golden Spider, so that only he could hear it.

I'm certain you can feel this gold thread's hold on your soul. As expected of my apprentice. I will tell you what the earth has said…

Shuga stood stock still inside Chagum's army tent. When Torogai finished relaying her message, he dashed outside the tent. The soldiers were all mustering up for battle against the Talsh. The men assigned to watch for developments from Kosenkyo were facing away from it, helping their comrades prepare.

Shuga grabbed the arm of one of the sentries and shouted, "The flood is coming! We must retreat!"

The sentry turned toward the capital, looking very pale. He had the archers fly whistling arrows with blunted tips to signify the retreat to the soldiers already on the battlefield.

But the soldiers fighting were hard-pressed to keep themselves alive, and they didn't hear the whistling arrows at all. The archers

behind them released more whistling arrows, trying to get their attention before it was too late.

One final volley of whistling arrows finally made some of the soldiers look up from the fighting. The sentries were completely out of whistling arrows, so the soldiers on the battlefield had to call out to their comrades to retreat.

The Rotan line started shifting back first: their horses made them faster and more maneuverable. They pulled back to the eastern foothills, killing enemies as they went. The Kanbalese and Yogoese armies followed the Rotan army along the path of retreat that they carved through the enemy.

Since their enemy was on the run, the Talsh army gave chase. They didn't get far before the banks of the Blue Bow River overflowed, making the battlefield into a muddy, slippery plain.

The rhythm of the Talsh war drums changed. They must have noticed the condition of the river, too, and were sending out new orders. Horses and men in armor slipped and fell as they sought higher ground.

The Talsh were trapped in a narrow area by the terrain. The Yogoese archers in the foothills released arrows at them as they fled. The arrows fell like a black thundercloud upon the Talsh army.

Thousands of men were pierced through and collapsed into the mud. They didn't rise. Shuga went pale as he took in the terrible slaughter.

All told, the Talsh survivors numbered something like three thousand. Hagu Muro's Kanbalese unit had attacked from the north to

the south and were partially caught in the flood, so they suffered heavy casualties. General Shubal and his Ormese lieutenant knew when they were beaten, threw down their weapons and surrendered to the Kanbalese army.

Chagum received news of the Talsh defeat while recovering in his army tent. Their side had won, but Kahm's report contained no joy. Chagum gripped his mother's hand with his own shaking one and tried to reassure himself about what had happened.

Later, Chagum learned that his father had died in the flooded capital. New Yogo, the land that was supposedly protected by a god, no longer existed in its previous form. The country that New Yogo used to be ended with the previous Mikado. That idea echoed hollowly in Chagum's heart whenever he considered it. This was an ending. He wondered if it might also be a beginning.

Part 5: New Spring Leaves

Chapter 1 - The Prime Minister's Decision

The season changed to autumn in Talsh. Leaves changed color on the trees and blew off in the crisp, cool wind. Prince Raul and his older brother Prince Hazar visited Aoil, the Emperor's Prime Minister and advisor, at his palace in Rahan. They hadn't visited Aoil's palace much since they were children, when they'd spend many years in Aoil's study reading about their nation's history by the light of a low fire.

The fire burned sua wood, which filled the room with a sweet scent. It was a custom to burn sua wood in Koranam, which was Aoil's home nation.

On a table removed from the fire somewhat, Aoil set out three teacups, then poured out three cups of pale green shaol tea. Aoil never drank alcohol, but he drank shaol tea several times a day.

After the tea was poured, Aoil sat down opposite Prince Raul and Prince Hazar and said, "I know you must be terribly busy, so thank you for taking the time to come and meet with me. Under ordinary circumstances, I would have come to visit you instead, but as you may imagine, our circumstances are anything but ordinary."

Raul smiled indulgently. "Your illness flares up in the autumn, does it not? It was no trouble to come."

Aoil smiled back. "Yes. I am not surprised that you remembered that from your boyhood days." Aoil took a sip of his tea. "So much time has passed since then. It's been more than twenty years since you two took control of your first fiefdoms."

"It's been twenty years for me, seventeen for Raul. I remember," Hazar said.

"Yes, that's right. It will be exactly seventeen years for Prince Raul in winter of this year. How quickly time passes." He sighed.

Raul, Hazar and Aoil sipped their tea and chatted pleasantly for a short while. Aoil poured out more tea for them all, then said, "Prince Hazar, Prince Raul. It has been more than a month since the Emperor selected me to choose his successor. I have considered the decision very carefully, and I have finally made my choice."

The two princes leaned forward in their seats.

"Please pass me the briefings of the nations under your command from the past month," Aoil said. "I wish to see how our people and plans are faring."

Raul frowned, feeling something like rage stirring in his chest. "You intend to choose the next Emperor based solely on our empire's current state? Has such a thing ever been done before?"

"Perhaps you believe past victories and accomplishments should be weighed on the same scale?" Aoil asked.

Prince Raul's eyes shone. "Of course they should! I shall receive word any day that the northern continent has been conquered by my army. Father puts great emphasis on the ability to invade and subjugate as well as rule. Would you ignore my father's set criteria for sound leadership?"

"I certainly will not ignore the Emperor's wishes," Aoil said. "The provinces you each have conquered and governed before now will, of course, factor into my decision."

Aoil's eyes took on a hard cast. "Military experience and success are important, but they are not the only qualifications required to rule well. The prince who conquers the most nations is not necessarily the prince most suited to govern them. The mark of success for a ruler is how well the people they've conquered are able to live. Am I wrong?"

Raul sank into brooding silence.

"You two have each conquered many nations over the past two decades," Aoil said quietly. "You have led armies and governed provinces in between military campaigns. It is my intent to discover which of these conquered provinces are flourishing and which are languishing. That, too, will be a factor in my final decision. Does that strike either of you as unfair?"

Raul hid his needling rage behind a blank, professional mask. Hazar smiled the tiniest bit at his brother.

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Prince Raul took deep breaths to calm himself while returning to his own palace on horseback. It had been more than twenty days since chamberlain Oiram had been imprisoned on suspicion of treason. Prince Raul had been incredibly busy for much of that time. One of the most critical information centers on the northern continent had been burned in the fighting, and the Yogoese had managed to burn many Talsh ships as well. Messages started coming more infrequently and included less detail.

"Hazar..." Raul clenched his fist. He was sure his brother had something to do with messages being intercepted or disrupted. And

he'd definitely said or done something to make Aoil change his mind about his own succession to the throne.

Raul stalked up the stairs into his palace in a rage. There was a message for him inside, detailing the current war situation in New Yogo. Kurz, Prince Raul's closest advisor, handed the letter over with a slightly pinched expression. "The hawk just arrived," he said.

Raul scanned the letter and frowned. "Kanbal and Rota are allies? When did this happen?"

The letter stated that the Kings of Kanbal and Rota had sent fifty thousand men to the Sangal peninsula to prevent the Talsh from pushing through to New Yogo. Their remaining armies were marching toward New Yogo itself, to support the armies there. Crown Prince Chagum was riding at the head of a combined Kanbalese and Rotan army numbering thirty thousand men.

"That brat!" Raul crumpled part of the letter in his fist. He drew his sword and did some regrettable violence to an antique vase before he managed to calm himself.

Raul was incensed. Crown Prince Chagum was only seventeen years old. How had he managed to betray Raul and destroy his plans so thoroughly? He sheathed his sword and rammed both fists into the wall, moderating his force so that he wouldn't harm his own hands. A painting slid off the wall to the ground with an alarming crash.

Raul let his rage crest over him like a wave, then started walking slowly down the hall. Kurz followed him to his private study and shut the door.

"Prince Raul, I have more news," Kurz said.

Raul ignored him. He sank into his hair and stared at the floor. "What is it," he said dully.

"Many of our ships docked on the Sangal peninsula were attacked by pirates from the south. Much of the fleet in port was burned. The people in the surrounding fishing villages smelled loot and sailed out on their small ships in revolt."

A crease appeared on Raul's forehead. "Sangalese pirates. They must have heard that Rota and Kanbal formed an alliance and were eager to pounce on our weakness."

The pirates of Sangal were descended from the Sangalese royal family. It was possible that Sangal's royal family was working against him in secret. Sangal was never a trustworthy nation to work with.

Goosebumps rose on Raul's skin. Sangal was a seafaring nation without set borders. It had been difficult to conquer, and once conquered, it had been difficult to hold. He wouldn't be surprised if the Sangalese royal family was behind these pirate attacks somehow. It wouldn't benefit them to have New Yogo under Talsh rule. Without a free northern continent, the people of Sangal would have nowhere to trade or travel that was not Talsh, which worked against the people's essentially free-spirited nature. That was what came of having a nation without set borders.

Rota's alliance with Kanbal had shifted the balance of power on the entire continent. Raul had believed that his brother was manipulating Kanbal's king and the southern clan lords of Rota, but apparently, those ties had been too weak to hold against previous promises. Raul had to turn this situation around now, immediately, before Talsh lost its grip on New Yogo completely.

"Kurz," Raul said, "what would you do if you were me?"

"Press the attack," Kurz said. "New Yogo is already weakened. Use our foothold there to crush the rebellion in Sangal and restore our alliances."

Raul nodded in agreement, then narrowed his eyes. Kurz had said exactly what he'd wanted to hear. It wasn't too late to fix all of this.

Kurz had a gift for seeing the things that escaped Raul's notice. It was this quality that made him such a valued advisor. He was a keenly perceptive man.

Raul rubbed his chin, then looked up at Kurz. *How does he always know exactly what I'm thinking?* Kurz was like a mirror, except that he was also capable of seeing things that wouldn't be reflected in a polished glass. He saw dangers lurking behind Raul that Raul wasn't capable of seeing himself.

Raul pulled out his writing tools and started composing notes with a brush pen. He stopped writing and set his pen aside. "Kurz. Bring Hugo to me."

Kurz frowned severely. His eyebrows shot up.

"What's wrong?" Raul asked. "Is he dead? Or being tortured?"

Kurz shook his head. "We've been asking him questions, and only applying enough pressure to goad him into answering. His life's not in danger. He seems to know that, so he hasn't revealed if he's working with anyone or not and refuses to give names. Any other prisoner would have spilled their guts by now. According to the doctor, he has a hollow tooth full of urasu."

"Urasu? What's that?"

"A potent poison capable of making the soul leave the body," Kurz said. "Releasing it a little at a time instead of as a full dose will completely numb all sensation of physical pain. If he chooses to absorb the full dose, he might fall asleep and never wake up."

"And has Hugo chosen to do that? Is he asleep now?"

Kurz nodded.

"Go get him anyway," Raul said. "And bring me that doctor, and any magic weavers we've got on hand. We'll wake him up."

Chapter 2 - Hugo's Persuasion

Hugo's limp body was brought to Prince Raul's study, where it remained for a night and a day. Nothing the physicians or magic weavers had tried managed to wake him.

Raul stalked into his study the first night after Hugo was brought up from the dungeons. He folded his arms. He understood what Kurz had meant by applying pressure without endangering Hugo's life now. All of Hugo's fingers were broken and the fingernails were gone. His face and shoulders were mottled with bruising. His pupils were huge and dilated even when his eyes were forced open.

But Hugo still had a pulse. One of the magic weavers, Sodok, was experimenting to see if Hugo's eyes would react to light. Sodok bowed his head to Prince Raul when he entered.

"I've performed a Soul Call, but it could take as much as half a day for his spirit to return. I can only hope that the call doesn't come too late," Sodok said. He didn't look at Raul when he spoke. He kept his eyes fixed on Hugo.

"Why did he want to put himself so far out of reach? Did he suspect I'd want to question him?" Raul muttered.

Hugo's lips twitched. "If I had...named names, Hamil would have had you killed." His voice was weak and hoarse. "Hamil has a plot to make Hazar the Emperor over you, by manipulating the Prime Minister."

Raul's eyes widened. "You knew that Aoil had been put in charge of the decision over who would be the next Emperor?"

Hugo nodded shallowly. "The last time I met with Aoil, I knew it. It was obvious just by looking at him who he would choose."

"Why?" Raul asked.

"He saw something in you," Hugo said. "Something that I see, too, and that Kurz doesn't."

"What is it? Don't be cryptic."

"It's simple," Hugo said. "Conquest is not rule."

Raul snorted. "Are you joking? Don't you think Kurz and I know that very well already?"

"You haven't demonstrated that you know it," Hugo said. "Oiram was a test. You weren't supposed to lock him up."

Sodok glanced apprehensively between Raul and Hugo.

Raul's eyes flashed with anger. "So what is it, then? This thing you see that Kurz and I don't?"

"Twenty-three million men. Four million men. Four hundred and eighty thousand men. Sixty thousand men. What do these numbers mean to you?"

Raul didn't understand, but then he caught Hugo's meaning. Twenty-three million was the number of people he'd conquered, roughly. The Talsh population was close to four million. There were almost five hundred thousand conscripts from subjugated nations in the Talsh army. Only sixty thousand Talsh men were voluntary conscripts.

"Foreign conscripts outnumber native-born Talsh soldiers six to one, but they're from subjugated nations. We can treat them as our own

troops--in fact, we always do. The Sangalese, Ormese and Horamese suffer unrest because they remember how things were before the war, but in a decade or two, they'll be like Koranam, where all the people are treated as Talsh citizens. Aoil comes from Koranam, and he's been selected to decide who will be the next Emperor of Talsh. Unrest is part of the growing pains nations suffer before they are fully integrated into our empire."

"Do you really think things will go that well? How have matters here been lately? I've been out of commission." He grinned. "I know what was in the letters Kurz received from New Yogo. I also know that Oiram is a spy for Hamil, who works directly for Prince Hazar. Unlike Kurz, who is Talsh, he comes from a subjugated nation--and is known to lend his ear toward others who have experienced the same fate."

Hugo's eyes seemed to brighten with some inner animating force. "Talsh's subjugated people are what make it run. Their soldiers and tax revenue keep the economy from collapsing, but this situation is not sustainable. All Hamil's co-conspirators that I know of are your military generals and governors. If I told you who they were, would you kill them? You would encourage revolt. A revolt in the army would not end well for Talsh. Will you execute everyone who stands up to you, at six-to-one odds?"

Raul opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out.

"What you call unrest is rebellion," Hugo said. "Talsh is already at war from within. You just haven't realized it yet. Oiram was speaking with many disgruntled officials before he was locked up. He probably delivered a complete report to Hamil. Prince Hazar knows more than you do at the moment."

Raul clenched and unclenched his fists. His hands felt strangely cold. He unbuckled his sword belt and rested it on the table, then took a seat near Hugo.

"Why tell me all this?" he asked quietly. "Why not sell out to Hamil and Hazar, if they're so sympathetic to the people of Talsh's conquered nations? Hazar would reward you generously if he became the next Emperor based on your reports. You could become a Prime Minister. You would be placed on the Noble Path and become part of the Talsh court."

"I could never do that." Hugo's voice was cold. "My parents and little sister were murdered by members of the Talsh court. I will never become one of them."

Raul blinked in surprise.

Hugo spoke in a tone of barely suppressed rage. "Prince Hazar and I don't think the same way at all. All he ever thinks about are ways to undermine you. People who think like that are consumed by their own petty preoccupations and never accomplish anything." He smiled. "You've fallen into a similar trap. Conquerors often become the conquered. You've stretched out your hand to the northern continent, and now the northern continent's actions are reflecting back on you. I have no idea how Hazar would rule Talsh, but I have a better idea of your outlook and capabilities."

Hugo tilted his head a little. "Hazar is unreliable in more ways than one. Oiram was in service with Hamil for over twenty years, and he was willing to sacrifice him to trap you. He can't be trusted in anything unless the end result harms you. If I defected to his side, I would expect to suffer the same fate as Oiram eventually.

"People trusted Oiram, especially the people of Talsh's conquered nations. Hamil and Hazar have lost more than they realize by tossing him aside."

Hugo faced Raul squarely. "You are Talsh, which makes you short-tempered and proud. You chase after whatever you want and fail to consider the consequences. But you also care more about the flourishing of the empire as a whole than your brother does. I believe you actually could reform Talsh into a nation with policies that are more beneficial to everyone. You might be the only one that can do it. I've staked everything on you. If you don't win against your brother, my life has no meaning."

Raul's lips twitched upward in a cynical smile. "It was a stupid bet, then. You know how things are going on the northern continent. I'm about to lose whatever tenuous authority I had." Raul updated Hugo on everything that had occurred since his imprisonment. After he was done speaking, Hugo closed his eyes.

When Hugo opened his eyes again, it was with great effort. He seemed tired. "We know that General Shubal can take New Yogo's capital. That's a foregone conclusion. It's holding onto the country that's the trouble, since the nations of the northern continent have all allied against us. I say we let Shubal conquer the capital, then withdraw the army to the island of Rasu below the Sangal peninsula."

"Why?" Raul asked.

"That way, we can maintain our foothold," Hugo said. "If we charge in and try to take everything now, there's a significant risk of failure. Not only that, countless soldiers will die for no reason on both sides.

Let the northern continent's soldiers return home, and relinquish control of Sangal."

He looked up at Raul, voice quiet. "Let all the men of the army who have fought for so long so far from home return to their families. Give the veterans and their families citizenship, as you promised. Without wars, there is no need for high war taxes. That will resolve most people's main complaint, and lead to more contentment and less unrest. Army men can become merchants and farmers again. Talsh has been at war for as long as I can remember. It is my advice to let Talsh be at peace."

Raul stared at Hugo and didn't speak.

"The Emperor dreamed of finding the Gate of the Sun on the northern continent. Let that be a dream that dies with him. There is no Gate of the Sun, no promised land, no paradise. If paradise is what we want, we will have to create it with our own hands.

"If you can get Prime Minister Aoil to believe that you intend to govern a world at peace, he will give you the crown."

Chapter 3 - Light on New Leaves

It was the rainy season again. Newly transplanted rice swayed in the high winds and lashing storms. The air smelled sweet and clean. The Tarano Plains turned a lush green, rice and grain growing tall toward the sky. It was still early spring, so the mornings were cold, but noon sunshine carried a hint of the warm summer to come.

Balsa learned that the war was over in early spring. She was staying in the stone caves until Tanda recovered. Racha told her that the Talsh encampment on the Tarano Plains had broken up. The Rotan and Kanbalese armies accepted the Talsh surrender and escorted them to New Yogo's border with Sangal.

It seemed too good to be true. Balsa wasn't sure she believed the news when she heard it. Still, she didn't say anything to dampen Racha's enthusiasm. A little hope never hurt anyone.

Racha also heard rumors about the Blue Bow River overflowing its banks. Thousands of white birds had flown all along the riverbank to warn people of the danger. Apparently, the flooding had caused a great deal of damage, but very few people were killed.

When Balsa heard this rumor, she smiled. Torogai and the other magic weavers had achieved something miraculous together. It was miracle on miracle: an end to the war with Talsh and the saving of so many innocent people from disaster.

One day, Racha came back from working in the rice fields gesticulating wildly, over-excited. "Balsa, do you know how the Talsh lost?" he asked.

"No," Balsa said.

Racha pulled off the smock he used for fieldwork and folded it, then said, "They're saying a huge army on horseback rode out of the sky and destroyed all our enemies." He sat down and started washing the arm wounds of an injured soldier that was also inside the cave. "Isn't that amazing? The river was overflowing and the Talsh had us trapped. Right when all we thought we could do was pray, Crown Prince Chagum flew out of the sky, surrounded by white light! Everyone thought he was dead! He dropped out of the heavens, leaving a white trail that the riders of Kanbal and Rota followed to the battlefield. The light guided them to the battlefield right when they were needed most. The Rotan and Kanbalese cavalry completely routed the Talsh army."

Racha glanced over his shoulder at Balsa. She wasn't smiling. "What's wrong?" he asked. "You don't look happy, or surprised."

Balsa looked away.

Racha finished bandaging up the injured soldier's arm, then turned to face Balsa.

"I'm happy that the war is over," Balsa said, "but I hoped Crown Prince Chagum wouldn't have to reveal himself like that…"

Racha frowned. "Huh? Did you know he was alive?"

Balsa nodded. "It's hard to describe how I'm feeling. It's like saving a child from bandits and returning them to their mother without a scratch. What do you think happens then? Usually, the mother praises god that their child is safe."

"They praise god and not you," Racha said. "Doesn't that make you angry?"

Balsa snorted.

"But Crown Prince Chagum is different from an ordinary child," Racha said. "He *is* a god, or the child of one."

Balsa flinched like she was in pain. Chagum had never wanted to be a god. Balsa had never wanted him to have to walk a road of suffering and blood and death. She remembered washing the blood off his face in the blizzard they'd been trapped in after fleeing from Talsh assassins. She was proud of him for achieving what no one else thought could be done, but she was worried about what would happen to him now. How would he choose to live? Would he even get a choice? Racha didn't know. It was possible that his life and legend had already been decided for him, without his consent or knowledge.

Balsa didn't have the heart to tell Racha everything Chagum had suffered. Nothing she could say would shatter his illusion of Chagum, anyway.

After Racha left, Balsa added some twigs to the fire and crouched down to check on Tanda, who was sleeping. The Mikado had died during the Talash attack on the capital, in the flood. After his funeral, it was likely that Chagum would be the next Mikado. She might never get to see him again.

A strange sadness and loneliness stole over Balsa as she felt Tanda's forehead. This situation was so much different from the time she'd parted from Chagum when he was a child. She remembered how hard his lip had trembled, trying to hold back his tears. She could think of nothing but his face.

But Chagum wasn't a child anymore. He had grown, like a fine tree, into a tall young man.

Separated or together, Balsa always felt the bond between them. For her, nothing about their relationship had changed, but Chagum didn't really need her to protect him anymore. He would probably remember her fondly from time to time, but…

She had been there through everything: smiles, tears, anger. And now, it was the end.

Balsa narrowed her eyes and stared into the fire.

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The days passed slowly for awhile. Soldiers who recovered from their injuries went back to working in the fields. Others lugged firewood back into the caves and strewed fresh grass and rushes over the floor. The caves were a cold, forbidding place at the best of times, but their efforts made the place a bit more cheerful.

There was a hot spring very close to the caves that was very beneficial for convalescence. The villagers had carved out five large, smooth pools into the mountain so that the hot water flowed freely into them. People frequently bathed there, and the minerals in the water helped soothe the wounded soldiers' injuries. Balsa also bathed at the hot spring and brought back two buckets of hot water to help keep Tanda clean.

It became clearer by the day which men would recover and which men wouldn't. Some men climbed over the fence between life and death

and returned to the world. Many others succumbed to the darkness and never awoke.

Half a month had passed since any pyres were built for the dead. Up until this time, the villagers had carried all the dead men to the riverbank and burned them over individual fires. When the dead men's names and villages were known, their ashes were collected in labeled urns and delivered to their homes via messengers. The villagers scattered the ashes of men whose names and villages were unknown on the roots of white-flowering tousu trees.

Some of the villagers had leeway to take care of the recovering soldiers after their fieldwork was done. Soldiers who'd been displaced by the war joined the villagers in their work when they were well enough. Carpenters came to the caves with straw and small twigs and changed out the floor now and again.

Tanda had awakened only a handful of times since his arm was cut off. He was poised on the thin white line between life and death. His body had recovered as well as it could, but the damage he'd suffered had made him sick to his soul. That would be much more difficult to recover from.

Tanda was a kind-hearted man. Witnessing the horrors of war had shaken him to his very foundations. No trace of his usual smile or positive outlook on life remained. He saw the terrible battle he'd lived through whenever he opened his eyes.

Balsa nursed Tanda back to health as well as she could. She told him that the war was over and gave him all the news of Chagum that she had. She was nearly out of money; King Radalle had given her a good amount, but she'd exhausted most of it getting to the caves, and the rest

had gone to buying food and supplies. The villagers would have allowed her and Tanda to eat for free without paying, but Balsa was too proud to live on charity when there was money that she could give as thanks.

Balsa wanted to work, but she had no desire to leave Tanda's side.

***

Mosquitoes started swarming in the bamboo outside the caves, so the villagers cut all the bamboo down. They burned fumigating fires in front of the caves to keep the mosquitoes away.

Tanda smelled the pungent smoke and heard birds twittering nearby and opened his eyes.

"Hyo, hyo." The bird calls were getting louder. They must be just outside the cave.

"The birds are singing again," Tanda whispered. He'd tried to speak louder, but his throat was too dry.

"Those are rushaki. They only sing in summer."

"Did it rain? I smell rain."

Tanda didn't usually talk so much when he woke up. Balsa leaned forward and said, "Yeah, it rained yesterday."

Tanda closed his eyes.

Balsa assumed that Tanda had fallen asleep again when he sat up a little, startling her.

"I want to go outside," Tanda said.

Balsa was surprised, but there wasn't really any reason why he shouldn't go outside. She nodded, then helped Tanda climb onto her back, being careful not to stress any of his remaining injuries. Balsa stood up straight with Tanda on her back and left the cave.

Birds passed overhead, twittering or scattering when Balsa came near. It was a warm day near the beginning of summer. Balsa set Tanda down on the roots of a tree that were covered with soft, thick moss.

Tanda rested his head against the trunk of the tree, then shifted himself with his right arm to get more comfortable. It was something of a struggle: Tanda wasn't as strong as he used to be.

Balsa sat down beside Tanda, close enough for him to lean on her if he wanted. Sunlight dappled the ground through the thick canopy of leaves. Wind whispered through the forest's undergrowth.

Tanda listened to the birds and stared at the water drops on the leaves that were left over from where it had rained the night before. "It's beautiful," he said. Tears leaked out of the corners of his eyes. "I feel so sorry for Koucha. He must have been killed."

Tanda wiped away his tears, then said the names of all the dead men whose spirits he'd helped guide to the afterlife. They would never see the sunlight again. Never return home to their families and villages. Tanda wept without stopping for a long time.

Balsa put her arm around Tanda and cradled his head against her shoulder. Tanda pressed his face into her arm and let himself cry.

Tanda lifted his head, a few straggling tears still on his cheeks. He stared at the light reflecting off the green moss he was sitting on, then said, "The snows might have collapsed the roof over winter. I didn't have time to reinforce it before I left."

Tanda was talking about his hut in the Misty Blue Mountains. Balsa smiled. "It's all right. I saw it in spring after the snow had mostly melted. It's still standing. It still looked clean, and the vegetables and herbs were all growing in the garden."

"They were probably weeds," Tanda muttered. "I don't suppose you pulled any for me?"

Balsa chuckled.

A mosquito buzzed near Tanda's cheek. Balsa swatted it away, then touched his hair, which had grown far past his shoulders. "It's gotten so long…if you're well enough for a bath, we can wash your hair, and I'll cut it."

Something in Tanda's expression softened. Balsa pulled him forward and kissed his cheek tenderly.

Tanda's raised his right hand slowly, settling it in Balsa's hair. He turned her head a little and pressed his lips to hers. Warmth bloomed in his chest.

Tanda rested his chin on Balsa's shoulder. They sat on the roots of the tree together, enjoying the last of the late spring sunlight.

Chapter 4 - Freedom

The sounds of wooden mallets pounding nails in echoed everywhere as the rebuilding efforts started getting underway. Carpenters called out to one another and delivered stacks of lumber.

It had been two months since Kosenkyo had flooded, and the carpenters and stonemasons were busier than ever. It was the beginning of summer, and all of the city's inhabitants were busily scurrying about, building a new capital on land to the southwest of Kosenkyo. Crown Prince Chagum had selected the place, and the Master Star Readers had called the location lucky.

By some miracle, the plains to the west of Kosenkyo had suffered almost no flood damage despite the closeness of the Blue Bow River. If the river ever flooded catastrophically again, this place should be fine. It was also close to the Imperial Highway and several smaller rivers, so it was in a convenient location for shipping and trade.

Until the new capital was built, all of the court nobles and government officials ruled from the Mountain Palace to the north of Yazuno. Chagum hosted the army and court in the mountains, frequently staying there himself until there were enough indoor spaces for everyone to take shelter. He left most decisions of government to officials with years of experience. Shuga and Ozuru made many of the hard choices after the flood.

The government officials and cabinet ministers wanted to build a palace for the Mikado in the new capital first. Chagum insisted on prioritizing living spaces for the city's inhabitants first. Some of the

older officials, cloaked in an exaggerated sense of dignity, told Chagum that such an action would be ugata kaim--going against all tradition.

"We must grieve and hold a funeral for our ascended lord, then begin work on your palace. Only then may we prioritize building homes for commoners."

"No," Chagum said. "The period of grieving for a Mikado is one hundred days. That's far too long a time. And a palace like the one that was lost would take over a year to build. Now is the time that is most fortunate for us to build up the infrastructure of the new city, while my father's spirit is still watching over us."

It was decided that the new city's initial buildings would be barracks and living quarters for the nobility and the poor whose homes had been destroyed.

Chagum had to go into debt to start building, since much of his family's wealth had been lost, but he didn't mind, and his credit was good. The government officials told him to raise taxes, but he refused. The war had been difficult on everyone. It made no difference to him if he made up the nation's debt over the course of months or years. Chagum thought borrowing from Rota might be a good idea, but the officials in his government opposed this for the usual reasons relating to international loans: high interest, and elevating Rota's status above New Yogo in their home nation. But again, Chagum didn't really care about that. He was thinking of his people, not the country's reputation.

Chagum wasn't even thinking about becoming the next Mikado yet. He had too much to do. The capital was being rebuilt. War veterans needed treatment and pay and rewards for service. People displaced

from villages and the capital needed temporary homes. It all weighed heavily on Chagum, like he was carrying a mountain on his back.

Shuga tried to help, but there was only so much he could do. He made sure Chagum's wounds stayed clean and that he remembered to take care of himself while taking care of the country. He was also able to assist with diplomacy, since Talsh had just sent over terms for a more lasting peace.

***

"I feel like I'm covered in mud wherever I go," Chagum complained when the day's deliberations were at an end. Shuga sat across from him at a low table.

"Is mud such a bad thing?" Shuga asked. "It's fertile soil, after all. Much can take root there."

"I suppose, but we have no idea what's going to grow in it, do we?" Chagum muttered.

Shuga picked up a scroll and opened it on the table. "That's true. But the Talsh have agreed to stop fighting voluntarily, and I think that's a pretty solid foundation for the future. I don't know all their reasons, but I assume they want to pull their troops out, too. They're very far from home here."

Shuga's smile contained a hint of wickedness. "The Talsh fleet in Sangal was attacked by pirates, so who knows how long they'll be able to maintain their grip there. King Karnan and Princess Karina are

reading the flow of events in our favor, I think. I've heard rumors that they've petitioned Prince Raul to restore their independence."

"As expected from Sangal." Chagum smiled. "They survived the Talsh without much loss of life. We could learn a thing or two from them." He smiled again, remembering Karnan and Karina as he'd last seen them.

Chagum's smile collapsed at the corners. "So much has happened," he said. "It's strange. Nothing went like I expected it to, yet everything ended up precisely as I wanted it to be."

"You were the one who turned the tide in our favor during the war, Your Majesty," Shuga said.

Chagum blushed a little and looked down. "I could never have done it without help. It might have been my idea, but I couldn't put anything into motion alone."

"Give yourself a bit more credit," Shuga said. "Without your warning, the people of Kosenkyo would not have been able to evacuate in time. If I listed all the remarkable things you've done to save us all, we'd be here all night."

"Let's not go into all that," Chagum said. "I'm tired."

***

Chagum came out of the Mountain Palace into the courtyard garden and took a deep breath. He would only be the Crown Prince of New Yogo for one more day. Tomorrow night, he would have to wash and purify himself, then go to the new palace whose exterior wood was still

untreated. He would be a new Mikado in a new palace. He felt a bit like Torugal, the founder of New Yogo, when he thought about it.

Chagum felt like this was the last night he had to make his peace with his father. If he made it through all the arcane rituals required, he would be standing in his father's place less than two days from now.

He'd heard rumors about his ascension already. Some people assumed he'd be like the previous Mikado and never leave his palace. Others assumed that he wouldn't be permitted to assume his father's mantle, either by government officials or by the gods, because he'd stained his hands with blood and sullied himself with the pollution of the world.

Chagum wasn't afraid. He knew the rituals to become the new Mikado were difficult, but he was certain he could handle them. Ten no Kami had never made his displeasure at Chagum's deeds known. Shuga and others who had told him what was required of him claimed that Ten no Kami would judge his actions, but he had nothing to worry about on that score. He was glad that he'd made the choice to save New Yogo, even if it meant defying long tradition.

Chagum didn't believe that Ten no Kami had judged or purified his father in the floodwaters of Kosenkyo. His father had judged himself. He considered it an unfortunate tragedy.

His father had believed in Ten no Kami. He'd believed that he was the child of a god. He had sacrificed himself to the disaster of the flood as a way of contextualizing his lifelong belief. Chagum didn't like to think about what that meant, that his father had thought so little of himself as a person. He did think that his father was sincere in his desire to save New Yogo. The thought made his heart hurt. There were

so many things Chagum wanted to say to him, and now, he would never get the chance.

***

Chagum squinted up at the sun through the clouds. He remembered the huge rainbow he'd seen just after the flood, lighting up the northern sky right on the border between Nayugu and Sagu. The flood had caused a great disaster in Sagu, but the water levels rising was just a normal part of Nayugu's spring. There were more Nayugu spirits than ever after the flood. Chagum felt like he'd experienced the strange ritual of life coming out of death.

He was born between Nayugu and Sagu, and could see both. The Star Readers were now saying that this period of great change was heralded by his birth, and that it was the will of the heavens. Chagum didn't think his purpose was so grand as that. Nayugu and Sagu operated on their own timelines completely independent of him. He only mattered because he was able to warn the people in Sagu.

How many people had died to save him? To save New Yogo? To realize his dream of a free northern continent? He both did and didn't want to know. Thinking about the cost of peace pained him. He worried that he was too inexperienced and immature to rule.

The people of New Yogo believed that Chagum had flown out of the sky with an army to save them. They believed his rumored resurrection was a sign from the heavens, meant to extricate New Yogo from a long and bloody war they never should have gotten involved in. That was what Shuga had told him. All of the current suffering people

experienced was blamed on the previous Mikado. Everyone believed that Chagum was truly the favored child of Ten no Kami, and that he alone could pull their nation back from the brink of disaster.

Chagum understood that this belief was based on long tradition. Every Mikado since the first had been revered as a god and imbued with the idea of divine will. The people were used to the idea. Maybe it comforted them, but…

Chagum looked up at the sky, frowning slightly. If people kept thinking the same way, nothing would change. Everything would be left to the will of Ten no Kami. People wouldn't act to support their own convictions if everything was Ten no Kami's—or his own—will. He would be recreating New Yogo exactly as it was, with all its potential for making mistakes.

I don't want to deceive people, or myself.

But he also didn't want to lay extra burdens on his people. The shared delusion they had was comfortable for them, because it was ingrained.

But I'm not a god, I'm a man. And they should know that.

Chagum had never displayed any signs of being divine over the course of his long journey. And yet, tomorrow night, if he emerged from the ritual chamber unscathed, he would be treated as a god for the rest of his life.

Maybe New Yogo doesn't need a Mikado anymore.

Chagum's father had been a Mikado in the purest sense, and his actions had nearly destroyed the country. If his father had been an ordinary man, and seen himself as one, he might have been persuaded

to turn aside from his course. Chagum might have been able to get him to accept the alliance early. He might not have been chased from the palace when the water spirit had laid its egg in him.

Can I do that?

Chagum didn't want to be the Mikado. He didn't want anyone else to have to be, either. No human was strong enough to bear the burden of godly responsibility. Chagum wanted to create a nation where he could greet his people face-to-face on much more equal terms.

People often said that the Mikado was the soul of the nation, but the nation contained untold thousands of people: untold thousands of souls and voices that had never gotten the opportunity to be heard. Chagum wanted New Yogo to speak with a chorus of voices. His own voice wasn't sufficient to guide so many people.

Chagum knew what he wanted, but he wouldn't be able to accomplish it immediately. New Yogo was still too fragile, too damaged: people needed something larger than themselves to believe in. He blinked up at the sky. He would have to bear the burden of a lie for a little while longer…but not forever. He would see people face-to-face, without hiding. He wouldn't hide his faults or foibles or suffering, as all the previous Mikados had done. He would carry the burdens of a god while casting a very human shadow.

He wanted New Yogo's people to know who he was, beyond the façade of the lie. Slowly, over time, he could erode the long-held belief that the Mikado was a god.

Chagum presented his face to the new summer sun and closed his eyes.

***

Chagum's servant, Ruin, came to the Mountain Palace's courtyard garden with a horse. Chagum liked riding to release nervous tension. Ruin must have guessed at his mood.

Chagum had just mounted up and was about to ride off when heard frantic footsteps behind him.

Mishuna and Tugum stood in the doorway leading out to the courtyard, next to a pillar. They were not accompanied by attendants, so they must have waited for a moment of inattention and slipped out of their rooms to see him. They wore mourning clothes for their father. There was a certain heaviness in their expressions and postures that Chagum understood all too well.

Chagum looked down at Mishuna and Tugum from horseback. "Have you two ever seen a field of wildflowers?" he asked.

Tugum didn't nod or shake his head. He looked up at Chagum wordlessly, like he was confused by the question.

Mishuna smiled. "I loved the garden at the Imperial Palace. I'm sure you remember."

"I do," Chagum said, "but wildflowers are even more beautiful than the garden. Would you like to see? There's a field of them not far to the south."

Mishuna's eyes widened in surprise. She walked toward Chagum. Tugum took a tottering step forward, then hesitated.

"Come on, Tugum," Mishuna said. "We're only walking as far as the gate. We need to hurry, or our attendants will find us."

Chagum dismounted from his horse and took both Mishuna and the hesitating Tugum by the hand. Tugum had never touched Chagum before and went rigid. Chagum waited for him to relax a little before he started walking. Three of the Mikado's Hunters were inside the courtyard garden to protect Chagum. They moved to follow Chagum, Mishuna and Tugum.

When the Hunters observed Chagum and his siblings exiting the gate of the Third Palace, they exchanged dark looks.

Tugum stopped in front of the gate and wouldn't go through it. He was panting with anxiety. He was probably terrified of having his pure soul corrupted by the outside world.

Chagum suddenly remembered his mother, who had come to the army camp to stay with him when he was sick and injured. She had gone against custom and long-held beliefs for his sake. He hadn't realized at the time how much she'd had to fight against herself. He had spent so little of his life in the care of his mother. Like Tugum and Mishuna, he was raised more by servants and attendants after his youngest childhood than his mother. And servants were strict. They hadn't allowed Chagum to go outside, ever. Tugum had very likely been raised the same way.

Chagum knelt down so that he could look Tugum in the eyes. "Are you afraid of the world outside?" he asked.

Tugum's lips trembled. He nodded.

Chagum smiled, then pointed up at the sun. "What's that, Tugum?"

"The sun," Tugum said. "It's Ten no Kami's eye, so he can see us."

Chagum nodded. "You might not believe me, but the sun shines everywhere. There's nowhere you can go where Ten no Kami can't see you. He's always watching over you, so there's no need to be afraid."

Chagum stood up and took Tugum's hand again. "Come with me," he said. "The field of flowers isn't far." He led Mishuna and Tugum through the gate. The sunlight was warm, and there was a gentle breeze. Birds flitted from tree to tree along the path.

Mishuna saw the field of flowers first. She gasped, then laughed for joy. The field sloped gently downhill from the path, and every inch of space was covered in a riot of bright color. Chagum led Mishuna and Tugum down the slope into the flowers, tamping down the tall summer grass with his feet.

"Why are you doing that, Chagum?" Mishuna asked.

"To make it easier to walk, and so we won't be surprised by snakes," he said.

Both Mishuna and Tugum stopped walking when they heard the word "snakes." Chagum laughed brightly. "Don't worry. There are no poisonous snakes around here. And I'm here to guide you."

The flowers in the field swayed in the breeze. Chagum found a grassy place in the sun and prepared an area for them all to sit down. Chagum remembered that Tanda could play the kind of grass in this field like an instrument. Chagum plucked a piece of grass, slitted it as Tanda had taught him, and placed it between his thumbs and index fingers. Then he blew into the grass.

The note Chagum played was high and shrill like a pig squealing. Mishuna and Tugum shifted a little away from him.

"What are you doing now?" Mishuna asked. Her eyes sparkled with mirth.

Chagum taught Mishuna to make a grass flute of her own. She looked over at Tugum and asked, "Do you want to try?"

Tugum nodded.

"Make a little gap here," Mishuna said, adjusting his fingers. "Perfect! Now you can blow into it."

Tugum took a gulping breath and blew hard onto the grass, but no sound came out. He kept trying over and over again until he produced a similar sound to Chagum's first high-pitched note. Tugum laughed so hard he lost his breath.

Chagum, Mishuna and Tugum played in the field of flowers together. When they were about to return home, Mishuna started picking flowers for a bouquet.

"Are those for your mother?"

Mishuna shook her head. "Your ascension ceremony is tomorrow, right? I want to put flowers on father's grave."

Chagum opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. He knew that his father was dead, of course, but he hadn't fully considered that all three of them had lost a father until this moment. The Mikado's body wasn't in his grave. Workers had dredged through the flood waters for days and hadn't found it. There was a new sacred burial mound now, like there had been at the Imperial Palace in Kosenkyo, but no Mikado was actually buried there yet.

Chagum had visited the old Imperial Palace not too long ago. It was muddy and in ruins, but flowers grew there too, though they were small. Wherever his father was, it was likely that he slept beneath a sheet of wildflowers.

"I'll tell father you brought flowers for him," Chagum said. "I'm sure he'll be happy."

Tugum pulled at Chagum's sleeve. "I want to play here again," he said. "Can we?"

Chagum grinned, but Mishuna looked troubled. "This is a special day, Tugum," Mishuna said. "You know we can't usually go outside. We'd make more trouble for Chagum."

Chagum blinked. Mishuna understood very well why he'd decided to guide them outside. They never would have gone out on their own—and it would not have been permitted if he wasn't there. Chagum rested his hands on Tugum's and Mishuna's shoulders.

"We'll come here again," he said. "All three of us will come to play in the flowers in spring and summer and the snow in the winter. I promise."

Sunset colors painted the western sky as the three of them made their way back to the Mountain Palace, walking slowly, hand in hand.

***

Two days later, Chagum was declared the new Mikado. He appeared before his family, servants and the nobility in the courtyard of the

Mountain Palace for a celebration. His clothes were pure white, and a thin white veil covered his face.

Chagum glanced over at Ruin and smiled. He shook his head a little and pointed to the veil. "Take this off," he commanded.

Ruin obeyed.

Chagum felt the warmth of the sun on his face and shoulders. The courtyard garden was full of light. Mikado Chagum went to greet his subjects face-to-face.

Epilogue:

The Hut in the Misty Blue Mountains

The armies of Rota and Kanbal returned to their home nations at the end of summer. New Yogo's people cheered for them and hosted them gladly during their long departure.

News arrived at midsummer that Prince Raul had ascended the throne as the new Talsh Emperor. The cicada sounds were so loud they sounded like screaming when Chagum received the message.

The survivors of the battle at the Tarano Plains left the caves where they'd been tended at the beginning of autumn. They thanked their benefactors and made their own way back to their homes.

It took the winter, another spring, and a new summer for daily life to return to what it had been before the war. Oh, some signs of war still remained, but since people were able to go about their daily lives, those signs mostly went ignored. The trampled rice fields recovered and were fertile again. Refugees that had been trapped in Kanbal and Rota crossed the border now that it was open.

Shirogai started being rebuilt, though rebuilding materials were still hard to come by and the damage was extensive. The air always smelled of woodchips and smoke. Hammering and sawing went on for days without a break. Some of the structures started coming together by summer of the year after the war. The merchants and people who had lived there were all scattered in Rota, though some decided to return. All rejoiced when they heard the news that Talsh had been defeated. Shirogai at the beginning of summer the year after the war ended was mostly a town full of young men who were waiting for their homes to be rebuilt before sending for their parents, wives and children.

Balsa stopped near a wooden sign that read, “Samada Store.” Chikisa was working outside. The store wasn’t yet the size that it used to be, but Martha, her family and her employees all had a roof over their head again. It was the end of summer; Balsa had spent part of the year traveling from Jitan to cities along Rota’s trade routes. She’d received a message from Toun that the family was in Jitan and insisted on guiding Martha and everyone back to Shirogai herself. The day after the temporary store was built, Martha took it all in and cried tears of joy.

***

Relocating again from Jitan was no easy task for Martha and the Samada Store. Martha was terribly busy for a few weeks getting everything ready, but finally, she and all her people were prepared to return to New Yogo. Toun rode beside Balsa and Martha, along with Asra and Chikisa. Asra and Chikisa had gotten used to life in Rota, but they both preferred it in New Yogo.

“Let’s go home,” Chikisa said.

Asra nodded and placed her hand in Chikisa’s.

Balsa and Toun started making preparations for departure after all the wagons were loaded.

Chikisa rode up beside Balsa with Asra in front of him in the saddle. “Balsa,” he said.

Balsa finished giving greetings and instructions to Toun and the others, then faced Chikisa.

“Balsa, I…” Chikisa didn’t know what to say. He sought for words. In the end, all he managed to express was his gratitude. “Thank you.” He felt much better after saying it.

***

Balsa raised an eyebrow at Chikisa, who was working outside with Asra. “Things have been pretty rough so far, huh?” she asked. There were still ashes everywhere. It was still easy to tell that the entire town had been burned.

“We’ll get it built up again,” Chikisa said. “It’s not so bad.”

Balsa reached out tenderly with both arms, enfolding Chikisa and Asra in a gentle hug .”I got you here safely, so it’s time for me to go,” she said.

“Already?” Chikisa asked. “Won’t you at least visit the temporary store?”

“I can’t stay long,” she said. “I want to be through the mountain pass by sunset.”

Asra and Chikisa pulled long faces.

“Don’t give me that,” Balsa said. “You know I’ll come back again.” She gripped Asra’s shoulder with one hand. “Look after your brother, now, Asra.”

Balsa mounted up and turned her horse.

Chikisa called out, “Balsa! Don’t forget to say hi to Tanda for us!”

Balsa turned to face him and smiled. It was a very midsummer sort of smile, warm and full of life.

***

Balsa went down the mountain path with fresh summer leaves falling in her hair. She'd made some money guarding the Samada Store's caravan through Rota. Without that money, she wouldn't have enough to buy food and clothes to get home.

The roof of Tanda's hut appeared in the middle distance. Balsa stood still, worried…but then she smelled something. Something cooking. A thin trail of smoke rose from the small hole in Tanda's roof. Mosquitoes swarmed around the hut and under the eaves, but they avoided the smoke completely.

Balsa approached the hut and opened the door, but didn't go in yet. Her senses were immediately overcome by the savory smells of stew bubbling over a fire. It was dumpling stew made with bamboo shoots. Tanda often made it for dinner during the summer.

Balsa also smelled alcohol. Torogai was asleep in the corner of the room with a bowl of rice wine resting in front of her, half-finished.

"I'm home!" Balsa said. She set her spear standing upright by the door.

"Welcome home!" Tanda called out brightly.

Balsa smiled and came inside for dinner.

This is the end of the Guardian of the Spirit series.

There are three side-stories: The Wanderer, Those Who Walk the Flame Road, and Where the Wind Takes Us.

Afterword

Chagum and Balsa's long story comes to a close here…at least for now. There is the seed of a story in my heart that involves Balsa during her childhood, but the full story of the *Guardian of the Spirit* series has its proper ending in this volume. Nayugu and Sagu met and melded, Chagum confronted his father, Balsa found Tanda again…I was happy that I could write all these things. Thank you for taking this long journey with me.

Futaki Makiko, an animator at Studio Ghibli, continues to provide stunning illustrations for this series. More than ten years have passed since we started working together. I would like to thank her personally, along with all the wonderful people who have made these books possible.

And you, too, again. Thank you.

Uehashi Nahoko

September 18, 2006

Abiko

Story Notes on Guardian of Heaven and Earth:

Writing Through Magic

This is the end of the *Guardian of the Spirit* series. I knew from the start that it would end with Balsa leaning her spear against the wall of Tanda's hut and going inside, but I had absolutely no idea how Balsa or Tanda would get there. Much of the way was unclear to me while writing, but there was one other thing that I had to have for certain: Chagum had to confront his father.I didn't want to write about Chagum trying to kill his father or being complicit in his father's assassination. That definitely wasn't the kind of story I wanted to tell.

Most of the novel grew organically from these two seeds. I began writing without knowing anything else for sure. But while writing, I heard Chagum and Balsa speaking, as if by magic. While Chagum was confronting his father, I heard him say, "Farewell!", and understood that both he and the Mikado would be parting from one another forever—but not as enemies. I felt the significance of their last meeting deeply. It is the end of their relationship, just as this book is the end of the story. The Mikado kept his gaze to the heavens while his son kept his feet on the ground. For me, the most important scene in the novel shows these positions reversed, with the Mikado sleeping forever under the earth

and Chagum living between the earth and sky with his brother and sister.

The field of flowers is based on one I discovered while doing fieldwork in western Australia. There were so many flowers that I couldn't see the end of them in any direction. Needless to say, that field made a powerful impression on me. Instead of focusing on the heavens or the earth, the scene locates people in the space between the ground and the sky. That's where everything alive must make its way.

I used to make grass flutes all the time as a child. Tanda taught Chagum how to make one in *Guardian of the Spirit*, so I wanted Chagum to teach his siblings how to make one, too.

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Some people might think that there's still a lot of Chagum's story to tell, and I can understand that perspective. But for me, the Guardian of the Spirit series was always Balsa and Chagum's journey together. Now that they've both come home, that is their ending, though their lives certainly aren't over. It's difficult for me to chart the path ahead for both Balsa and Chagum, especially Chagum as the new Mikado.

I also tried to bring Tanda and Balsa's long-held love to a satisfying conclusion. They've known one another since childhood and have lived most of their lives knowing one another, even if they're not always together. It was difficult for me to select a label for their relationship, since "husband and wife" was too pedestrian and "spouse" or "partner" was too generic. I settled on □□□□□tsureai, a gender-neutral term with the same meaning as "spouse" but with an emphasis on being both led

and followed. In such a relationship, the two follow and lead one another at different points, and I think that's exactly right.

That's not to say that writing a conclusion to their relationship was easy. I wanted to emphasize that Balsa would still be a bodyguard and Tanda would still be a magic weaver in his hut, but they would always be in one another's lives and completely committed to one another. The breakthrough I had for their relationship was when Balsa spoke to me, again as if by magic: "Tanda, I need to cut your arm off."

I could see the scene so clearly, but I'm not a doctor, so I am grateful for my cousin, Dr. Matsuki Takamichi, for giving me advice on how to write an amputation done in an area that was anything but sterile. Some of the details of the scene, like cauterizing the wound, are somewhat gruesome, but they are necessary; without cauterization, Tanda would have either bled to death or died of infection. I could clearly see Balsa tying a tourniquet, making the swift cut, and burning the edges of the wound.

Balsa's path led her to shed the blood of many people through fighting. I wanted her to shed blood to save someone. That seemed to be a fitting sort of end for her.

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Uehashi Nahoko

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Abiko